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On the Other Side of the Hyphen: Vietnamese-Irish Identity

Mark Maguire

**Supervised by A. Jamie Saris, PhD, and Professor Lawrence J. Taylor**

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**Abstract**

In August 1979 the first of a small number of refugees from Vietnam arrived in Dublin. They came to Ireland via camps in Hong Kong and Malaysia with harrowing tales of escape and of long periods of travel across the South China Sea. These were the so-called 'Boat People', whose plight was captured in newspaper headlines from the late 1970s onwards. Those who came to Ireland—some 212 persons in the first instance—were invited to do so by the Irish Government. Religious and non-governmental organisations carried out much of the resettlement work, however. The majority of the refugees were dispersed to a variety of locations throughout Ireland, from Tralee and Portlaoise to Cork City. In the early 1980s most re-migrated to Dublin.

This is the story of the Vietnamese-Irish, of takeaway businesses, achievement in education, family, diaspora and identity. Much of this story is told in the words and through the eyes of the people themselves. What emerges is an ethnographic portrait of a minority confronting its own identity in a fast-changing Irish society. This thesis is an exploration of Vietnamese-Irish identity. In order to explore identity for this small, yet heterogeneous and widely dispersed minority, my emphasis has been on a number of 'sites', such as education, work and homes. Theoretically, I explore spatial dimensions of identity in detail, as well as arguing against current approaches to migration and minority life in Ireland.

## Acknowledgments

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**Introduction: *Tết* in Ireland**

Every year Vietnamese-Irish people gather to celebrate the New Year's *Tết* festival.[1] It is a scene that is played out along roughly similar lines wherever the Vietnamese diaspora is to be found. In 2003 *Tết Nguyen Dan* was the year of the Goat, *Qui Mùi*. The festival dates back to the Han Chinese domination of Vietnam, and while the agricultural workers of the countryside still follow a fairly strict set of procedures the urban dwelling and overseas Vietnamese have tended to adopt a more *à la carte* approach. They draw 'traditional' rituals together and fuse them with the cultural elements of new homes, from Seattle to Paris and Dublin.

During the weeks before *Tết,* people spruce up their homes and persons, pay debts and attempt to resolve family or friendship differences. Seven days before the celebrations a farewell ceremony is held for the spirit of the kitchen, *Ông Táo,* who returns on the night of the thirtieth day of the last month of the year. Bamboo poles, *Cay Neu,* several meters high are traditionally to be found in front of each house, wrapped in red paper for good luck—legend has it that the colour red scares off evil spirits. For Vietnamese-Irish families such traditions are followed where culturally and economically possible. It is not possible to paint rented accommodation for a New Year's celebration, for example, or to scare off evil spirits with a bamboo pole in the front garden of a semi-detached house in West Dublin.

In most homes the ancestors' altar is cleaned and then decorated. On the night before *Tết, Đêm Giao Thừa,* the head of the family or *tộc trưởng* begins the

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[1] The New Year's *Tết* festival occurs on a date determined by the lunar calendar.

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process of inviting the souls of the ancestors into the world of the living for the duration of the celebration. The head of the family does this by burning a stick of incense at the ancestors' altar. It has often been noted that this is an important moment for the cultural education of the young: each family member takes their turn to bow down before the altar, carrying with them a mental image of an ancestor and, perhaps, asking for their assistance and counsel. *Tết* is not just a festival for the cultural education of children, however; *Tết* is the festival *of* children. The young, particularly girls, dress in their best clothes and play together to the backdrop of fireworks. Parents sometimes give their children a red envelope containing a small amount of money for good luck. Traditionally, it is also the occasion to see *Múa Lân*, the dragon dance. *Múa Lân* has become a virtual logo for overseas Chinese identity, and complex social and cultural realities have been collapsed into the image of the dragon dancing through 'Chinatown'. It is less popular amongst overseas Vietnamese populations.

In 2003 the celebrations were held in a Dublin City hotel rather than in the Vietnamese-Irish Association's building. I received an invitation from the organisers on the basis that I had lost my language teacher to a sick mother in Vietnam and the festival offered an excellent opportunity to headhunt a replacement. The second floor of the hotel—a long-time watering hole for rich Irish farmers—hummed to the noise of a 150-strong crowd. As a guest, I was shown to a table with others who had contact with Vietnamese-Irish people: teachers, policemen, civil servants and community workers. Mobile phones constantly purred behind the chatter of young men and women; children played tug-o-war with their mother's arms in an effort to get to friends with more freedom. The younger men smoked and drank; some even younger people had

perfected the adolescent scowl that is the Western world's signifier for boredom. The second-generation, particularly the young women, were extremely well heeled; yet even they were upstaged by their younger sisters, who stood out against their hyper fashionable siblings. Some girls looked strikingly 'different', like exotic dolls come alive in their velvet red dresses and with their long, straight black hair. They were dressed not so much as children, but as childhood is imagined to be.

A large red and gold trimmed banner exclaiming 'Happy New Year' hung over the hotel function room's fireplace. Beneath the banner, an argument broke out between two men trying to hook up a microphone, as an elderly man in a grey three-piece suit and heavy bifocals made his way to the top of the room. His progress was in the time-honoured style of the politician: he stopped at each table in his path to shake hands, admire a child or just nod politely. The two men in dispute over the microphone, as if preparing for a visiting head of state, seemed to grow more agitated as he neared. They engaged in a quintessentially Vietnamese-Irish style of 'discussion', which is fairly disconcerting to the unfamiliar spectator. One man offered a view on what should be done in a tone and at a volume that could only be the truth manifesting itself. Then, the other man offered a different perspective that was more correct and therefore at a varying tone and at a higher volume. Perspective piled up on perspective, until violence seemed inevitable. At that exact moment the pattern collapsed as one individual introduced a fresh piece of information, flourished at his opponent in a new sentence. And so the process continued, until someone interrupted them by turning on a hitherto unnoticed power switch.

The old politician-like Vietnamese-Irish man had reached the top of the room. He shuffled some papers together as a younger relative called for attention in an impossible to understand stream of Vietnamese, Chinese and feedback. The elder man wished in the New Year, offered congratulations to everybody on their growing prosperity and talked at length about the significance of family. The importance of the *Tết* celebrations was incalculable, he said, as it was a time for families, no matter where the members were, to gather together and celebrate their ancestors and their culture. Like the Christmas-time flights home from New York or London for multi-national Irish families, for him *Tết* was a time when a more physical sense of kinship was possible.

I know he said all of this not by virtue of my tourist-level Vietnamese but rather because as soon as he had finished a Vietnamese-Irish woman in sophisticated designer clothes switched off her mobile phone and joined him at the top of the room. She introduced herself as his grandchild and translated his words into English for the benefit of those who had no Vietnamese, a number that included many Vietnamese-Irish children. Every time I would strain to hear her translation an interruption would come when someone stopped at the guests' table to offer New Year's greetings. As one young man chatted amiably at the table a hush descended over the room. The older man in the three-piece suit was singing in a low mournful voice. 'Like *Sean Nós*, isn't it', said someone from the end of the table, comparing what we were hearing to a style of *Gaelic* singing. 'What's the song about?' I asked the young man standing beside our table. 'He sings about his village; … it's a song about home', he said. While the sad song continued, people slowly went back to their conversations and gradually drowned the sound out. But he had another role to fulfil: a special

ceremony called *Le Tru Tich* is traditionally to be held at the midnight hour on New Year's Eve. The ceremony involves firecrackers and other festive items that make loud noises to drive out the old and usher in the new. Setting off firecrackers in a hotel function room is unwise to say the least, particularly when you have invited community liaison policemen along. Snaking up the walls on both sides of the Happy New Year sign were red and gold trimmed fireworks in long ladders. The lights were dimmed and with just one false start the elder pressed a switch that started what turned out to be electric fireworks. Bright neon lights flared up and died out in each bulb, moving up through the fireworks to the synthesised sound of explosions.

Figure 1: 'Vietnamese-Irish New Year's Celebration'



(Courtesy of Kyros Communications Documentary, *Refugees: the Irish Experience,* 1992.)

A younger man took the microphone and shouted 'Happy New Year' at the audience in a manner reminiscent of a guitar-rock band opening a concert. I

had met him several times before. His family lost everything following the fall of Saigon, though now he is a fairly prosperous man in Dublin and is heavily involved in charities both in Ireland and in Ho Chi Minh City. He half-shouted his way through a song that was, judging from the audience, either very humorous or very bawdy, or both. He had just finished his party piece when the clatter of the catering staff could be heard. Roast beef and vegetables were on the way. Other people said a few words at the microphone, and some time later dessert arrived. *Danh Day* and *Banh Chung* are usually served during the Vietnamese New Year. *Danh Day* is a soft and sticky cake of glutinous rice, rounded in the shape of the heavens, whereas *Banh Chung* is a square cake, made with bean paste and small pieces of pork, wrapped in *dong* leaves and tied with bamboo. Its square shape is said to symbolise the earth and the harvest. Both desserts were made by Vietnamese-Irish women and brought to the event.

At the guests' table, we began to discuss the food, trips to Southeast Asia and our collective surprise at the roast beef dinner. As I drifted into conversation with a young Vietnamese-Irish businessman others of his age began to pull back tables and chairs from the front of the room. 'What's this?' I asked. 'The band, and dancing … no idea who … supposed to be famous', he said. Another guest touched my arm: 'who did he say it was?' I joked that we were about to work off the Irish dinner with some Irish dancing. 'Ha', said the other guest to the table, 'some Irish dancing—The Siege of Ennis!' 'No', countered the young Vietnamese-Irish businessman, 'The Siege of Saigon!'

As it turned out, the band was a local girl group with a Vietnamese-Irish singer and an average age that couldn't have been more than 18. The group mimed several pop music hits into headset microphones while gyrating around

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four-foot poles. Despite being periodically jabbed and rabbit punched by his mother, one young Vietnamese-Irish boy, who got trapped in a corner behind the girl group when the adults moved the furniture, spent about half an hour giggling like a cartoon character before being evacuated during a Spice Girls' number.

Though I was invited to the subsequent celebrations, the first *Têt* festival that I attended in the City Centre hotel remained the most significant to me. It allowed a certain type of thin description, which illustrated the collage of cultural influences and generational styles that greets the eye when first trying to understand Vietnamese-Irish people's lives. Such a thin frame is useful insofar as it allows one to add flesh at various points and explain the form that may be observed. What follows is a path that leads away from this opening vignette, diverges to various points of interest, but also returns. To write about the Vietnamese-Irish is to relate the complexities of history, memory, livelihood and everyday life; but it is also to say something beyond the nexus of cultural forces that facilitated a particular version of *Têt* to be played out in a Dublin City hotel. To write about the Vietnamese-Irish is to also ask questions about how we represent life in Ireland from the perspective of a minority.[2]

**Culture and Migration**

When trying to make sense of what one might see during a Vietnamese-Irish New Year's celebration, from the fake fireworks to the local girl band or the fusion of foods, one is tempted to begin by thinking in terms of cultural change. And, one might just as easily be persuaded that a description of a Vietnamese-

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[2] When thinking about 'minorities' one must note that this category usually denotes numeric minorities but it does not necessarily suggest marginality—elites are minorities *par excellence.*

Irish *Tết* festival represents a snapshot of an ethnic minority on the way towards being Irish. Are people, who were once 'strangers', who arrived in Ireland with little save the clothes on their backs in late 1970s, becoming assimilated into the culture of the nation-state? In scholarly literature a question such as this is often answered by making reference to the notion of acculturation, which, in simple terms, is a model through which changes may be observed when one culture comes into continuous, first-hand contact with another. In this thesis, however, and particularly in the concluding essay, I will argue that the question needs to be re-thought and that, if we are to do full justice to the complexities of Vietnamese-Irish lives, a more nuanced answer is required.

I begin by suggesting that a preliminary understanding of Vietnamese-Irish life must be predicated by a fourfold shift in the manner in which migration and culture is thought of in Ireland. Firstly, the history of the Irish diaspora, a complex and immensely varied flow of humanity, must be recognised as a superb touchstone for the intellectual efforts to understand contemporary migration to Ireland. One might recall here Thomas Sowell's point that 'the Irish were the first great ethnic "minority" in American cities'.[3] This recognition adds historical depth to how migration and assimilation may be understood: while anthropology has added a considerable and sophisticated literature to this topic, in countries such as Ireland, and, indeed, in other 'new host' countries across Europe, a historical amnesia seems to have accompanied political discussions about migration. Secondly, one must fully understand the cultural history of minorities in Ireland and, together with the lessons learned in thinking about the Irish diaspora, look closely at what it means to be Irish from the perspective of a

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[3] Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 17.

minority and from a non-national perspective.[4] All too often public debates over

migration in Ireland have been suggestive of a white, Catholic and culturally

homogenous nation-state suddenly encountering the kinds of differences that

have no historical precedent. Thirdly, one must recognise that the scholarly

literature on migration and the theoretical models for understanding minorities

and cultural change must also be subjected to critical evaluation both historically

and in terms of their synergy with contemporary trends. The arguments I make

herein reflect a concern that many of the contemporary attempts to understand

migration to Ireland involve the use of off-the-shelf theoretical models, which are

hardly appropriate for understanding the case studies of the Irish diaspora and are

completely inappropriate for understanding migration to Ireland. Finally, all

three shifts in thinking must go together to form a cohesive approach in order to

do full justice to the complexities and nuances found in the lives of Vietnamese-

Irish people. I suggest that a similar fourfold shift in thinking may throw new

light on other research into ethnic minorities in Ireland.

One must certainly rethink the ways in which minorities are often

imagined: as homogenous 'cultures' or as communities that change in the face of

outside forces, eventually moving towards hybridity or assimilation. These ways

of imagining minorities are far too blunt and suggest that cultural change is

simple enough to be understood with the help of a vend diagram. One must also

be mindful of the dangers in conceiving of minorities as 'strangers' who threaten

and demand what seems to be the impossible—multiculturalism. The stranger all

too often seems to wash up on our shores without history, as a refugee, migrant

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[4] I employ the term non-national to problematise the centrality of the nation-state and the
national culture that is presumed to exist therein, rather than using the term in the
manner in which it is currently being employed in public consciousness.

or alien, with all transnational connections severed at the border, and it is at the border that the clock of cultural history is reset to zero. The history of the Irish diaspora has many lessons for today's world, not least of which relates to those tempting words that appear to be useful for discussing migration and minorities: assimilation, acculturation, the stranger, multiculturalism, or even culture itself. The Irish were also once conceived of as strangers, who threatened not to assimilate; they were once discriminated against racially and they discriminated against others on the grounds of 'race'. Many migrants from this country maintained powerful transnational roots, even back in the 19th century, and flitted about the globe, often through the routes of empire, with little regard for distance. 'The Irish' do not constitute a universe of culture and migration where every possibility exists, but thinking about the diaspora does demonstrate how complex and open-ended migration may be.

**Thinking about Strangers in Ireland**

Clifford Geertz once noted that it is difficult if not impossible to put one's finger on the exact point at which things become something else. In Ireland this is not so difficult when it comes to migration. It has become commonplace to hear that Ireland was a net exporter of people—an emigrant nursery, to borrow Jim MacLaughlin's evocative phrase—and that it has now become a focus for in-migration.[5] Though one must be careful not to erase the complexities of Irish migration, particularly over the last several decades, it is hard to overstate the importance of this transition. By the time I attended my first *Tết* festival in Ireland one would have supposed that the national issues surrounding migration

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and demographic change should have been a cause for celebration. The dazzling

galaxy of the Irish diaspora was ceasing to be recharged from emigration and the

complexity of this vast human flow was increasingly being understood in

important scholarship, from Noel Ignatiev's work on 'race' in the United States

in *How the Irish Became White* to Donald Akenson's study of Irish slave-owners

in Montserratt, *If the Irish Ran the World*.[6] While such studies dispelled the

myth of there always being solidarity in poverty, they also pointed to the

complex and integral role of Irish migrants around the world. Such key work

also held up a new mirror to the voluminous national literature on emigration,

which stretches from poetry to academic monographs.

It is interesting today to reflect on how inescapable emigration was to

observers of Irish culture in the past. In the 1950s, by way of illustration, the

Nobel Laureate Heinrich Böll wrote of the one young woman who stayed behind

in a West-of-Ireland village, clinging 'to this hopeless, lonely spot', while every

evening reading the newspaper's advertisements as an index of a region

voluntarily bleeding to death:

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[5] See Jim MacLaughlin, *Ireland: The Emigrant Nursery and the World Economy* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994).

[6] See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); and Donald Harman Akenson, *If the Irish Ran the World: Montserrat, 1630-1730* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997). Akenson recently demonstrated the power of myth in Irish Studies in his description of the story of *The Voyage of the Naparima*. Written by J.J. Mangan, *The Naparima* recorded the travels of a famine ship through the diary of Gerald Keegan. According to the jacket, 'there is a gentleness about this book that belies the horror of the underlying facts'. Its incarnation in Canada in 1982 garnered several awards. It was reprinted by Wolfhound Press, serialised in *The Irish Times* and read by thespians with gravitas on radio. As it turned out, to everyone's embarrassment, not only was it fiction, but fiction by a Scottish-born Orangeman. It is the instant believability of the story that is interesting, of course. Akenson's earlier works had already done much to explode the myths of the diaspora, such has his hard-to-ignore conclusion that Irish-Americans are predominantly Protestant. See Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Toronto: P.D. Meany Company Inc. Publishers, and Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1996).

> Houses for sale—she counts seventy, that means seventy emigrants, seventy reasons for appealing to kindly Jesus. Houses wanted: two— Oh, *Kathleen Ní Houlihan*, what have you done to your children! Farms for sale: nine; wanted: none. Young men who feel a vocation for monastery life—young girls who feel a vocation for convent life. … English hospitals looking for nurses. Favourable terms, vacation with pay, and once a year a free trip home.[7]

One might also reflect on the imagery of Liam O'Flaherty's *Going into Exile,* which was as horribly accurate as an insult from a family member, in which the old mother was left at home alone with her distracted imagination, 'listening foolishly for an answering cry'.[8]

Before Heinrich Böll delivered his nuanced portrait of Ireland and tempted disaffected but highly literate German and French people to relocate to rural Cork—'foreigners' to a younger Áine Ní Chonaill—Harvard's Conrad Arensberg noted that in County Clare in the 1930s every child growing up must expect to see at least three out of every ten of his playmates and companions go beyond the seas. But few scholarly works could equal John A. O'Brien's *The Vanishing Irish* in imagery and daring. Written in 1953, its sub-title, *The Enigma of the Modern World*, captured its intention to suggest that the Irish might well vanish from Ireland or be 'found only as an enervated remnant in a land occupied by foreigners'.[9] The following rather extraordinary cartoon appeared early in O'Brien's work and confirmed the seriousness of the author's thesis:

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[7] Heinrich Böll, *Irish Journal: A Traveller's Portrait of Ireland* (London: Vintage, 2000 [1957]), pp. 66-71 passim.

[8] Quoted in Fintan O'Toole, 'The Ex-Isle of Eirn' in Jim McLaughlin (ed.) *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), p. 166.

[9] John A. O'Brien, *The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World* (London: W.H. Allen, 1953), p. 7. Writing sometime earlier, Sir William Wilde (father of Oscar) noted that such a scenario had already taken place and that those who remained were the 'poor, weak, old, lame, sick, blind, dumb, imbecile and insane', a population later

Figure 2: 'The Vanishing Irish'
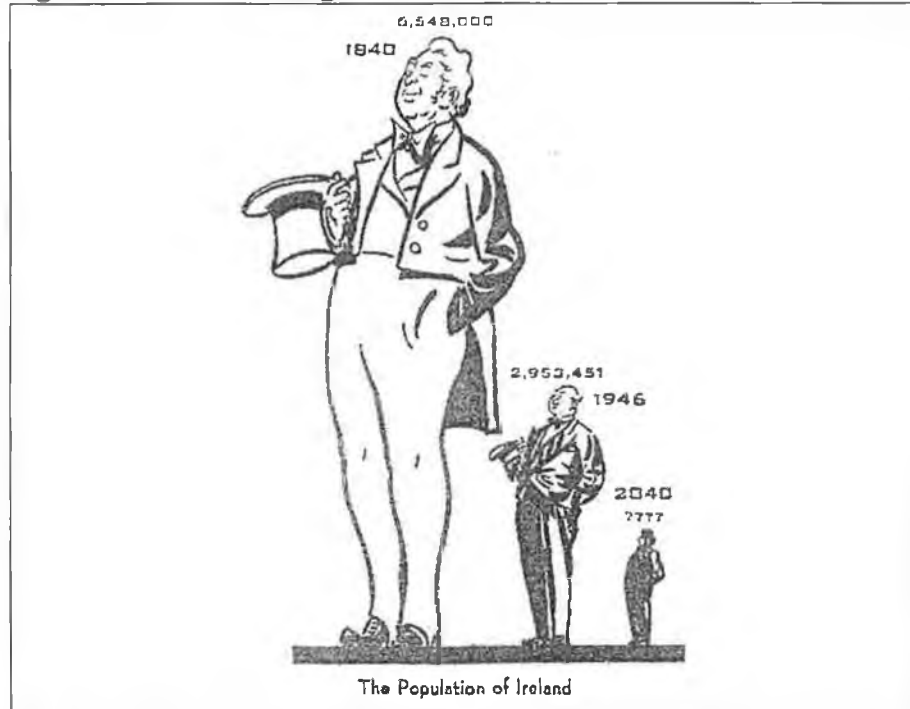


(Source: John A. O'Brien, *The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World,* London: W.H. Allen, 1953, p. 18.)

But emigration seemed suddenly to be a nightmare from which Ireland did awaken, half-remembered and soon forgotten. In the 1990s the Irish gentleman from O'Brien's image put on weight again and turned out to be a bit of a racist, albeit in a rather fumbling way. 'Race', a rather loose word, cloaked in dodgy 19th century ideology, may have all the scientific credibility of snake oil but this has not tempered its phantom objectivity in Irish public culture. Scare journalism headlines in the past few years have included, 'Refugee Rapists on the Rampage' and 'Refugee Tried to Bite me to Death'. While, at the more liberal end of the spectrum, the *Irish Times* not so long ago complemented 'self-sufficient' overseas Chinese students for their capacity 'to work long hours in

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described by historian J.J. Lee as 'rats who just did not know how to race.' Quoted in Roy Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Allen Lane and Penguin, 1993), p. 18, 284.

low paid jobs' and to 'bring a welcome diversity to ... public transport

systems'.[10] Aside from demonstrating that a descriptive style popular in the

Victorian era has survived longer than was thought, the liberal media also

highlighted the current lack of a more in-depth and nuanced view of migration

and of Irish cultural history. Where one would expect an urgent move towards a

more full recognition of diversity, responding to closed mindedness with narrow-

gauge identity politics has become all too frequent a move—some of the most

impressive anti-racism speeches made in Ireland in recent years have been

delivered while attempting to get replica famine ships to float.

In terms of cultural history, more work is certainly needed to bring out

minority voices from Ireland's past. In this regard, Patrick O'Connor has already

made an important contribution through his history of the Irish-Palatine 'colony'

in Limerick, as has Ronit Lentin in her sophisticated reading of minorities in

Dublin's history, and so too has C.L. Innes in her treatment of black writers in

18th century Ireland.[11] But one must also take cognisance of the elephant in the

room. It has long been argued that the birth of the Irish nation-state enshrined a

particular form of nationalism, which drew together a variety of resources of the

mind—ideas about 'race', about who belonged and who did not, and a powerful

teleology of a hidden culture emerging in history. It would thus be appropriate to

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[10] See Mark Maguire and Paul Hollywood, 'Introduction: Rewriting the City,' Rewriting the City: encounters with the Global Irish City, a special issue of *CITY: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, (eds.) Mark Maguire, Paul Hollywood and Bob Catherall, vol. 6, no. 2, (2002), pp. 1-6.

[11] Patrick J O'Connor, *People Make Places — The Story of the Irish Palatines* (Newcastle West, Ireland: *Oireacht na Mumhan*, 1989); Ronit Lentin, 'At the Heart of the Hibernian Post-Metropolis: Spatial Narratives of Ethnic Minorities and Diasporic Communities in a Changing City,' in Rewriting the City: encounters with the Global Irish City, a special issue of *CITY: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, (eds.) Mark Maguire, Paul Hollywood and Bob Catherall, vol. 6, no. 2, (2002), pp. 229-250; C.L. Innes, 'Black Writers in 18th Century Ireland, *Bullán* V, 1, (2000), pp. 81-97.

put the culture back into history by re-conceptualising the intersection of religious, political and cultural forces that have haunted modern Ireland. F.S.L. Lyons captured this in an often-quoted passage from *Culture and Anarchy* where he described, 'an anarchy that sprang from the collision within a small and intimate island of seemingly irreconcilable cultures, unable to live together or to live apart, caught inextricably in the web of their tragic history'.[12]

Searching for an answer to the why of this collision takes one most immediately on a journey towards the 19th and early 20th century and the hardening of versions of Irishness. By the early 1900s, in order to join Arthur Griffith's nationalist organisation one required proof of membership of the Gaelic 'race', and such an exclusivist way of thinking certainly stands out in stark relief against the background of an earlier generation of political leaders for whom being Irish, Protestant, Anglo-Irish or being of English birth were not necessarily antagonistic to patriotism. This hardening of identity would seem to emerge amid the busy symbolic traffic across the Irish Sea. Irish self-definition and the intellectual and imperial technologies for imagining nations, 'races' and peoples may only artificially be separated at this juncture in history, as A.J. Saris has convincingly argued.[13] Just as D.P. Moran could write a deeply ambiguous yet undeniably xenophobic philosophy of an Irish Ireland in which 'the Gael must be the element that absorbs' (with indigestible Protestants being 'resident aliens' as opposed to the 'thouroughgoing Irish') so also could a more liberal

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[12] F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1979), p. 177.

[13] A. J. Saris, 'Consuming Traditions: Producing the Nation in the Great Irish Exhibition of 1853'. Paper read at the annual conference of the Anthropological Association of Ireland, *Colonialism and Post-colonialism*, NUI Maynooth, 1995. See also Mark Maguire, 'The Space of the Nation: History, Culture and Conflict in Modern Ireland'. *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, (1998), pp. 109-120.

view emerge: in 1923 George Bernard Shaw argued that now 'we are all citizens of the world; and the man who divides the race into elect Irishmen and reprobate foreign devils had better live on the Blaskets where he can admire himself without disturbance'.[14]

The taken-for-grantedness of 'race' and identity is interesting here. In the late 19th century the language of 'race', in particular, formed a good proportion of the symbolic traffic across the Irish Sea. *Punch,* for example, famously likened the vast Irish emigration to English cities to an invasion and challenged Englishmen to see for themselves how 'vomited from hundreds of ships, to crawl like wingless vermin over the country' were 'tens of thousands of Irish'.[15] A decade later Mr Punch was in a more jocular mood, and the Irish man was rendered thus:

> A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro is to be met with in some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It comes from Ireland, whence it has contrived to migrate; it belongs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages; the lowest species of the Irish Yahoo. When conversing with its kind it speaks a sort of gibberish. It is, moreover, a climbing animal, and may sometimes be seen ascending a ladder with a hod of bricks.[16]

Irish popular publications of the day were equally bigoted, and the more sober media on both sides of the Irish Sea condemned such descriptions. What we are discussing here, of course, is the manifestation in stereotypes of ways of knowing. And, by noting difference and alternative versions of Irishness in the

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[14] D.P. Moran, *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., n.d.), p. 37; George Bernard Shaw, 'On Throwing out Dirty Water' *Irish Statesman,* 15 September 1923.
[15] *Punch,* vol. 22, Jan-June 1852, p. 205.
[16] *Punch,* vol. 43, 18 March 1862, p. 165.

past we also move closer to questioning the contemporary perception that Ireland was until recently a homogenous place, free of culture wars.

If one moves forward in time to the arrival of the first significant refugee population in Ireland, the Hungarian families who came to Ireland in the late 1950s following the communist suppression of Budapest, one may begin to think that difference has always been in tension with a homogenising nationalism, intertwined with a complicit mode of governance. It is little surprise when thinking about the resettlement of around 1000 refugees from Hungary that the role of the Catholic Church was key in generating a groundswell of public support, manifesting itself in the £170,000 collected at Church gates in 1956 by the Irish Red Cross. The Irish Government also jumped to act and articulated a desire to resettle the maximum number of refugees that the resources of the State would allow—this two weeks before the UN Convention on Human Rights was ratified.

The refugees were resettled in the old army camp at Knocknalisheen in County Clare. In a perfectly bizarre and completely fictive newspaper article the thoughts and feelings of the refugees were imagined. 'It was good to have kindly people about you, saying soft things in a language you did not understand', reflected one journalist. And later,

> they would pray for these boys and girls, men and women, bishops and priests and ministers, who were making it possible for them to live again. When you're thrown on the roads of the world such kindness goes very deep into your heart.[17]

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[17] *Clare Champion*, 1 December 1956. Quoted in Bryan Fanning, *Racism and Social Change In the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 88.

The refugees were selected on the basis of their compatibility with 'the basic Christian ideals' of Ireland.[18] But the presence of such ideals did not prevent the entire episode descending into farce. They were virtually quarantined in the camp, and strict control was maintained over movement. The Irish Red Cross also treated those in the camp like a military emergency problem and refused to allow any internal organisation. At one point they demanded that 'agitators' be removed, and at another point began a smear campaign against the refugees' leader, accusing him in a letter to the *Taoiseach* (Premier) of consorting with prostitutes.

By early 1957 the Hungarians were leaving Ireland in considerable numbers and urging the Government to do everything possible to hasten that process.[19] Towards the end of April the situation in Knocknalisheen camp had reached crisis point, and on 29 April a hunger strike began. Many refugees reported that they never intended to stay in Ireland and had been reassured that Clare was only a transit camp, thus exploding the myth that one is capable of little save gratitude when 'thrown on the roads of the world'.[20] Rumours began to circulate that the strike was inspired by communism. However, it was obvious to most observers that the strike was more likely inspired by the bars on the windows of each hut and the barbed-wire fences that surrounded the compound. And, one could also point to the heavy-handed mechanisms for controlling the refugee population, such as 'quarantine periods' within an

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[18] Department of Defence, Memo, 10 November 1956. Quoted in *ibid.,* p. 89.
[19] See *Irish Times*, 'Hungarian refugees go home as are unable to find work in Ireland', 24 April 1957, p. 1.
[20] *Clare Champion,* 1 December 1956. Quoted in Bryan Fanning, *Racism and Social Change In the Republic of Ireland*, p. 88.

overall 'policy of containment'.[21] The fact that the Hungarian refugees were complaining of being unable to find work was taken by many to be a national insult and senior Government representatives urged them to 'behave in a reasonable manner'.[22]

It is important to recall, however, that the economic and infrastructure situation in Ireland in the late 1950s was chronic. Just as Hungarian refugees were complaining that they could find no work and agitating for resettlement to another country so too were huge numbers of unemployed members of the population emigrating. Indeed, unemployment had reached such levels in 1957 that there were two hunger strikes going on simultaneously, one at Knocknalisheen and the other in Dublin, where two unemployed men and a member of parliament (TD) starved themselves to draw attention to the plight of those out of work. 'We are condemned to a life of poverty, misery and suffering,' they argued. By May 1957 this rash of protest had even confounded the writer Flann O'Brien. In his *Irish Times* character of Myles na Gopaleen, O'Brien consulted with eminent theologians in order to arrive at a precise definition of a hunger strike: 'a form of heroic protest, not necessarily fatal'.[23]

The hunger strike by the Hungarian refugees eventually faded as more and more left Ireland. This was but one of the cultural clashes in the country at this time, however. In the ongoing public debates about Travellers, 1957 was a high water mark for the issue of 'control'. From the early 1950s in Galway City, for example, Travellers had already been identified as a 'problem' enemy in a war over culture and values. Early in the decade the City Council an order to

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[21] *Ibid.,* p. 90.

[22] *Irish Times,* 3 May 1957, p. 1.

[23] Myles na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn', *Irish Times,* 17 May 1975. p. 7.

control temporary dwellings, and by 1953 temporary dwellings were banned

from no less than 17 roads. Frequently in the early 1950s police were called to

'endeavour to keep tinkers on the move'.[24] This intent to exclude and remove a

bothersome population had by 1957 transformed into an emergent national policy

or 'solution', which was the settlement strategy that manifested itself in the

Commission on Itinerancy. In 1957, when the strategy was still gaining its

shape, *Dáil Éireann* witnessed a fairly typical and steady stream of complaints

from local politicians about Travellers and numerous suggestions as to how to

gain 'effective control' over this 'small domestic problem'.[25] One Deputy

captured the prevailing mood and couched his comments in illustrative language:

> My chief objection is that they leave their camping places full of filth.
> When we are inviting tourists here, we should prove we have a sense of
> order, a sense of decency and a sense of tidiness.[26]

In 1957 it seemed that 'control' was a key issue when dealing with travellers and

refugees.

1957 was also the year of the so-called boycott village, the dramatic

protest in Fethard-on-Sea over a Protestant woman in a mixed marriage splitting

from her husband in a row over their children being educated as Catholics. The

mother took the children to Belfast where she demanded of her Catholic husband

emigration to Australia and their children being educated as Protestants as terms

of reconciliation. The day after news broke, a boycott of all Protestant-owned

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[24] *Galway Borough Council*, 17 February 1955, p. 479. Quoted in Jane Helleiner, Traveller Settlement in Galway City: Politics, Class and Culture, in *Irish Urban Cultures* (eds.) Chris Curtin, Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, 1993), p. 185.
[25] *Dáil Éireann, Ceisteanna*—Questions. Oral Answers—Census of Itinerants, vol. 161, 7 May 1957, p. 731.
[26] *Ibid.*

businesses began in Fethard-on-Sea. The boycott, the Parish Priest declared,

would continue until the children were returned to the village.[27] National

attention turned to this tiny village where the boycott seemed to be enforced with

zeal, though many commentators at the time suggested that there was a

expectation that senior Catholic hierarchy figures would call for calm. However,

on June 30 the then Bishop of Galway addressed the Annual Congress of the

Catholic Truth Society where he noted 'a concerted campaign to entice or kidnap

Catholic children and deprive them of their faith'.[28]

In *Small Differences* Donald Akenson has convincingly argued that what

made Catholics and Protestants culturally similar in Ireland far out weighted

what set them apart. What divided was not economy, not day-to-day activity,

but, rather, a division of the mind, of perception and of culture. In 1957 this was

still enshrined in the *Ne Temere* decree, which effectively rendered mixed

marriages as a battleground for religious conviction and for the control of the

faith of children.[29] Control over the faith of children was often articulated

through the steady segregation of education, which even stretched to how the

university sector was viewed. As far back as 1848 Edward Maginn, Coadjutor

Bishop of Derry worried over Catholics in Trinity College becoming

'shipwrecked in faith and moral, wholly profligate'. He even argued: 'I doubt

whether Paganism in its filthiest lycees, where Venus and Bacchus were deified

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[27] See Hubert Bulter, *Escape from the Anthill* (Mullingar: The Lilliput Press, 1986), p. 136.

[28] Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[29] Laws against mixed marriages date back to the mid-18th century and were primarily set to protect Protestants against the evils of so-called 'Popery'. A series of relief acts dulled the impact of these legal measures in the latter part of the 18th century. However, it took until the 1870s before the legal block against mixed marriages being celebrated by Catholic Priests was rendered null and void. By 1908 Pius X's Sacred Congregation of Propaganda had come into force, which decreed *Ne Temere:* that all interfaith

and recommended to gentle youths as objects worthy of divine worship, exhibits

... anything more detestable than our Dublin, Edinburgh and Oxford stews.'[30]

Thus, religious endogamy and segregated education worked together well to

generate small but very real differences in Irish history.[31] As Donald Akenson

has concluded:

> Sometimes, as in Belfast and Derry, one-faith ghettos emerged, but such
> enclaves were not necessary to the maintenance of the Irish social system.
> Protestants and Catholics could live side by side, as they frequently did,
> and still live in completely separate worlds. Ultimately, these two
> separate worlds, were worlds of the mind.[32]

Thus, in 1957 the questions of Travellers' settlements, of refugee resettlement

and of the separate worlds of Irish Catholics and Protestants call for answers in

cultural historical thinking that must begin with an understanding of Ireland not

as a homogenous nation-state but, rather, as a long-time space of cultural

conflict, collision and creativity.

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marriages had to be celebrated by Catholic priests, that every opportunity to convert
your partner should be availed of, and that children should be brought up as Catholics.
[30] His argument was of course bound up in a larger discourse over Godless education.
See Donald Akenson, *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1815-
1922* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillian, 1988), p. 116.
[31] The notion of 'small differences' employed by Akenson draws on a Freudian
sensibility that cultural differences are ultimately differences of the 'mind'. One has to
go no further than actual accounts of Protestant perceptions of Catholic Ireland to note
that this weak cultural account does little justice to the powerful truth effects that such
'small' differences generated. For example, in a autobiographical account of an 1880s
childhood in the northern counties Shane Leslie recalled: 'I had not long grown out of
nursery or schoolrooms before I realised that nothing really mattered in Ireland except
Home Rule, a rumour of ill omen against which all the Orangemen and good men on the
estate were pledged to fight.' And then, in a passage reminiscent of a hundred and one
New England settler's captivity narratives: 'The mountainy men would descend on the
village and gardens and divide up the beautiful grounds in which we played.' Quoted in
Terence Dooley, *The Plight of Monaghan Protestants, 1912-1926* (Dublin and Portland
Or: Irish Academic Press, 2000), p. 15.
[32] Donald Akenson, *Small Differences*, p. 126. Thus, it should not be surprising that at
the time of the Fethard-on-Sea boycott the *fact* of the *Ne Temere* decree was not up for
question. On 8 June 1957 the Right Reverend Dr. Phair, Church of Ireland Bishop of
Ossory, Ferns and Leighlin commented on the outrageous boycott and yet remarked that
'of course I deplore mixed marriages'. See *Irish Times*, 8 June 1957, p. 1.

One may turn, for particular emphasis, to the Protestant minority in

Ireland as an illustrative example. The growing international fascination with the

work of Irish 'big house' writer Elizabeth Bowen throws light on many of these

themes. Born into posterity before, in the words of Honor Tracy, 'ivy-covered

ruins showed their jagged teeth to the sky', Bowen's writing articulates an

Anglo-Irish identity from the position of a minority, though her perspective

belongs to the world of an elite as much as to that of a religious minority.[33] In

*Seven Winters* childhood is the lens through which difference is examined, as this

lengthy quotation illustrates:


> It was not until after the end of those seven winters that I
> understood that we Protestants were a minority, and that the unquestioned
> rules of our being came, in fact, from the closeness of a minority world.
> Roman Catholics were spoken of by my father and mother with a
> courteous detachment that gave them, even, no myth. I took the existence
> of Roman Catholics for granted but met few and was not interested in
> them. They were, simply 'the others,' whose world lay alongside ours
> but never touched. ...
> I walked with hurried step and averted cheek past porticos of
> churches that were 'not ours,' uncomfortably registering in my nostrils
> the pungent, unlikely smell that came round curtains, through swinging
> doors. On Sundays, the sounds of the bells of all kinds of churches rolled
> in a sort of unison round the Dublin sky, and the currant of people
> quitting their homes to worship seemed to be made alike by one human
> habit, such as of going to dinner. But on weekdays the 'other' bells, with
> their (to my ear) alien, searching insistence had the sky and the Dublin
> echoes all to themselves. This predisposition to frequent prayer bespoke,
> to me, some incontinence of the soul.[34]


In *Bowen's Court* the author reconstructs her kin line. She discovers the

fingerprints of her ancestors on the oppression of Ireland and, at the same time,

on a version of Irish identity. This intense ethnic autobiography might be read,

in a crude cause and effect way, as the triumph of form over content, with the

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[33] Honor Tracy, *The Straight and Narrow Path* (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 3.

author seen as a representative of a redundant class locked voluntarily in the attic of her own memory—and Bowen does try very hard to affect a stylish calm in the centre of cultural and political turmoil.[35] Her family life seems to reveal both a lack of integration and a studied ignorance of the Irish question: 'each of these houses, with its intense, centripetal life, is isolated by something very much more lasting than the physical fact of space: the isolation is innate; it is an affair of origin'.[36] But this vanity is recognised. While *Bowen's Court* and *Seven Winters* seem to go against the grain of national historical consciousness, being displaced does not suggest a lack of authenticity. The most intriguing aspect of her work is the relationship between memory and place. In *Bowen's Court* family life is dominated by the home as a place where one may dwell poetically.

> What runs on most through a family living in one place is a continuous, semi-physical dream. Above this dream-level successive lives show their tips, their little conscious formations of will and thought. With the end of each generation, the lives that submerged here were absorbed again. With each death, the air of the place had thickened: it had been added to. The dead do not need to visit Bowen's Court rooms—as I said, we have no ghosts in that house—because they already permeated them. Their extinct senses were present in lights and forms.[37]

Here we are challenged to think about how people make homes in the world and about how political and social forces may cross certain people off from the list of

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[34] Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*, (London: Vintage Classics, Random House, 1999), p. 508.

[35] Just as Bowen often appears aloof from the struggles for freedom in Ireland, so too does cultural history appear aloof from the historical struggles of the Protestant minority. Ireland has always been curiously silent about the unsettled, sectarian ground upon which this State's foundations were laid. Patrick J. Buckland, for example, has pointed out that in 1911 there were 327,000 Protestants in what would become the *Saorstát*, while in 1926 there were 221,000. This population shift may or may not be due to sectarianism, but between December 1921 and March 1923 192 residences belonging to Protestants were destroyed. Few spoke out about such atrocities at the time, except for exceptional voices such as that of the artist Seán Keating. See Patrick J. Buckland, 'Southern Unionism, 1885-1922' (PhD, Queen's University, Belfast, 1969).

[36] Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*, pp. 19-20 passim.

those who belong. Elizabeth Bowen put it bluntly: 'How long, after all, does it take to belong somewhere, without apology? Surely, 300 years is enough?'[38] Her questions were anticipated by James Joyce, and one is reminded of Ned's reply to Bloom in the Cyclops chapter of *Ulysses*: 'I'm a nation for I'm living in the same place for the past five years.'[39]

These questions are as much cultural as political, and it is the cultural dimensions that concern me here. When one begins to try to understand Vietnamese-Irish identity one must question how it emerges and roots itself in a place or in a particular geography. By briefly reflecting on the Irish diaspora and on Irish cultural history the contingencies of identity reveal themselves and who 'we' are appears less and less to be fixed, hard-shelled and immutable—the identity of others is, of course, similarly emergent. Vietnamese-Irish identity emerges from the position of what is now an older ethnic minority in Ireland. Thinking about such a minority presents a challenge to any easy cognitive map of the world—we are used to hearing about Irish-Americans, for example, but are less used to putting 'Irish' on the other side of the hyphen.

While literature has had an excessively powerful hold over the ways in which Irish cultural history is debated, reflecting on marginal voices such as Elizabeth Bowen's does have the virtue of allowing us to displace ourselves and to look more precisely at how people belong. Vietnamese-Irish people also present a complex set of minority issues. Family and home life play important roles in identity, but so also does diaspora and memories of elsewhere, of

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[37] *Ibid.*, p. 451.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 458.
[39] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 272.

Vietnam, war or exile. The story of the Vietnamese-Irish is very clearly a tale of migration.

Migration is as old as human history. Across the centuries various political formations, from the Chinese Empire to the dynastic states of 19th century Europe, have found ways of reconciling culture and migration, though not always in peaceful or successful ways. In more recent times a new twist has been put on this very old story. The tension between the role of the nation-state and the forces of what is now being called globalisation is increasingly causing migration to top today's agendas. This is not just a political matter: the ability of nation-states to control demographics, labour supply and, indeed, provide (and pay for) structures for appropriate 'integration' is bound up with how migration is understood. It is also a cultural issue. The nation-state is often taken to represent a national culture, which migrants seem to threaten. The ideology of multiculturalism appears to stand in opposition to those who call for tighter controls and, often through naivety, for policies tinged with racism. To the surprise of many, Ireland has recently joined the ranks of those very many countries confronting the challenge of migration, a challenge that all too often is met with a Manichean struggle between multiculturalism and cultural protectionism.

When one thinks about Vietnamese-Irish people, their history, identities and everyday lives, one needs to question the very language used for description: culture, assimilation, acculturation and multiculturalism, to name just the more prominent terms. These terms appear value-free and logical at first glance but, on closer inspection, turn out to be ill fitting and laden with hidden ideology. The simple fact is that what one might call border theories, such as acculturation

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or assimilation, would be sufficient if one could talk in terms of a Vietnamese or Bosnian refugee leaving their 'home' and assimilating to the culture of an Irish neighbourhood. When migrants cross our borders we could ask: in what way is their culture becoming more like our culture? Instead though, the picture is a more complex one, more mesh-like. We have to imagine a world defined as much by border crossings as by borders. One has to talk today, perhaps, of a Chinese-Vietnamese-Irish professional, on the move since the 1950s and settling in Ireland. Her children's identity may render problematic her own sense of tradition, which was tenuous at best in the country of her birth, and conceivably the very reason she left. And, what of her claims to be Irish, either before or after a hyphen? Does she really acculturate here *per se*, with a family stretched across the hemispheres and held together by transnational connections, now augmented by frequent travel? And what of exile? Like the Irish authors that Dermot Bolger recently described, perhaps people no longer go into exile—they simply commute.[40]

**Thinking Cultural Thoughts**

The opening vignette of this doctoral research, a description of the 2003 *Têt Nguyen Dan* celebrations in Dublin, gives a first insight into the style of Vietnamese-Irishness. In order to further explore Vietnamese-Irish identity it has been necessary to first stake out a position in relation to the history of migration, minorities and cultural change. As I will argue throughout this thesis, ideas such as cultural change or assimilation are not simply abstract or theoretical matters: these notions often help organise and interpret the social world. John Maynard

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[40] Dermot Bolger, 'Editors Note' in Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Ireland in Exile* (Dublin: New

Keynes once quipped that anti-theoretical, practical people are simply under the spell of long-dead theorists; the cultural history of the arrival and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in Ireland over the last 25 years is littered with examples of how theoretical positions have had consequences that were all too 'real' for the people concerned, and many common-sense approaches to resettlement refer back to what are often very shaky theoretical positions.[41]  For example, in the past, an approach that sought to avoid so-called ghettoisation and speed up assimilation led to a policy of dispersing refugees to many locations around Ireland, which has since been abandoned.

Thus, in this thesis I argue that a more nuanced approach to migration and culture has an importance beyond intellectual inquiry.  In straightforward terms, any argument about Vietnamese-Irish life that is predicated by an impression of Vietnamese culture assimilating in the Irish nation-state does not hold: in subsequent chapters I will demonstrate how difficult it is to talk about Vietnamese-Irish cultural change when there is no homogenous culture to speak of.  Nor may Vietnamese-Irish identity be broken into two or three along the lines of ethnicity.  Therefore, my initial argument is that what appears to be a common-sense approach—trying to gauge whether Vietnamese people are becoming Irish—may generate more problems than it may resolve.  This is certainly true of the use of the word culture.  Raymond Williams has observed that it is one of the most difficult words in the English language, yet it is frequently used as if it is one of the more straightforward.[42]

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Island Books, 1993), p. 7.

[41] See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 1996), pp. ix-x.

[42] Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976).

To move beyond vend diagram-like descriptions of cultural change is not to elide obvious questions raised in my description of the Vietnamese-Irish *Tết* festival, however. I too am interested in 'Vietnamese-ness' and in 'Irish-ness' and how both sides of the hyphen are articulated and negotiated; however, I do not take these terms to denote a fixed cache of 'culture' that is opened to change once a hyphen or border is crossed. After describing the early reception and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the first chapter of this work, and after describing the contemporary situation for them and for their families in Ireland in the second chapter, I move on to consider how Vietnamese culture might be understood as a dynamic and ever-changing set of ways through which people interact with the world—'Vietnamese-ness' signifies a coherent and yet open and contingent set of practices, beliefs, etc. that is as dynamic as anything 'Irish-ness' might signify.

The ethnographic record has long demonstrated that culture is a synthesis of stability and change and that it has the capacity to be both adaptable and portable, allowing for a certain normality and, indeed, serenity amid conditions of change and novelty. In later chapters, when discussing the lives of Vietnamese-Irish people, I suggest that by considering themes ranging from transnationalism to livelihood and home life one may begin to see a certain form in Vietnamese-Irish life: for example, I argue that inside Vietnamese-Irish homes seemingly ancient ancestral shrines rest side-by-side with modern technology and collude to indicate not only how novelty is domesticated alongside a past that is constantly re-imagined but also, crucially, how such cultural work is fundamentally spatial, a practice I term enshrining.

But the form that emerges in this discussion of Vietnamese-Irish life must be qualified in important ways. The first qualification is that Vietnamese-Irish people see their own lives changing everyday and they think about how the lives of their children will differ from their own. The last chapter of this work, which is on the second-generation Vietnamese-Irish, indicates possible new configurations as those young people who were raised to see themselves as Irish negotiate the worlds of family and work, and the forces of racism and social change, as they affect their own identities. The second qualification is that the form of Vietnamese-Irish life is a product not only of their own efforts, practices and beliefs, it is also a product of wider forces in society and in and beyond the nation-state. Migration has always pushed at the limits of nation-state power and, indeed, called that power into being. Today migration has, perhaps more than ever before, called into question the current configuration of the nation-state, its reach and its ability to enact a consistent governmentality. In Vietnamese-Irish life, for example, we see how the nation-state's capacities for handling populations that seem not to belong are reflected in structural problems ranging from resettlement of refugees to employment niches and racism. The transnationalism that patterns the lives of many Vietnamese-Irish people and other minorities in Ireland is as much a result of factors in Ireland as any desire to live between two worlds. Having a vivid past played out in another country may reflect tightly held political beliefs for some, but for others a less appealing explanation is apparent: due to small numbers, sectional lifestyles and a general lack of connectivity with wider social life, many Vietnamese-Irish people have to live a transnational life in order to live in Ireland. The words of many in the older generation resonate with the description of minority life, albeit an elite one,

left to us by Elizabeth Bowen. Just as Bowen could describe worlds that 'lay alongside ours but never touched' so too have Vietnamese-Irish people spoken of Dublin in a manner that would lead one to believe that they haunted the city rather than lived in it.[43] By paying attention to the lives of people who through imagination or physical movement move in and between the lines of nation-states one may gain important perspectives on political power.

The Vietnamese-Irish are doubtless an important case study for those thinking about migration in Ireland. As an older minority they have important lessons to teach about the role of education, labour force participation and identity. However, before proceeding, it is important to record that this text is not just the culmination of several years of research intended to address specific problems: this year is the 25th anniversary of the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in Ireland. Much of this text is historical, as it deals with the resettlement of a refugee population; much more of this work is ethnographic, as it traces out an outline of Vietnamese-Irish life by exploring what life is like for those concerned through their eyes and in their own words. In this, there is an intimacy, which central to all ethnographic projects: intimacy requires trust, and trust requires responsibility—to conduct a study that would stand as a record for future generations was something many Vietnamese-Irish people took a keen interest in. Yet, privacy had to be protected, and trust could not be betrayed. Such balancing acts are at the heart of the ethnographic tradition. I have come to know and count as friends many of the people whose words are recorded in this dissertation, and I hope that this study of Vietnamese-Irish life goes some way towards allowing their important voices to be heard.

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[43] Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*, p. 508.

**Chapter 1: Guests of the Nation-State**

> A refugee is an unwanted person who makes claims on the rest of us.[44]
> — P.J. Byrne

In late August 2002 an elderly man died from his injuries in St James's

Hospital in Dublin. He had been walking with a friend through the City's Temple

Bar district when he was attacked and viciously beaten by two men. While the

national newspapers complained about crime epidemics, the increasing number of

attacks on ethnic minorities and modern Ireland having lost its soul, it was briefly

possible to catch a glimpse of another story: the man was one of the original

Vietnamese programme refugees—so-called Boat People—who came to Ireland in

1979.

Vietnamese-Irish people have maintained a curious position on the

landscape of the national imagination. Like Chilean and Hungarian programme

refugees before them, the Vietnamese literally ended up in Ireland, a country in

which migration was understood as emigration and where notions of cultural

difference were largely articulated *vis-à-vis* the national differences of near

neighbours or the absolute differences of faraway strangers. Doubtless, the

Hungarian refugees of the 1950s fared worse than the Southeast Asians. They were

pelted with rain 'on the windy side of Knockalisheen', County Clare, where the

chief pastime was to pre-empt leaks in the roofs of disused army huts with

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[44] This intriguing definition of a refugee comes from a working paper penned by P.J. Byrne, Secretary to the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE). It appeared in note form in an unpublished policy research paper. One can only guess that having reviewed considerable literature on the topic these words, taken from an unidentified secondary source, seemed to the author more fitting than any legal definition. See P.J. Byrne, 'The 'Boat People' – and our response' (unpublished report to the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants, n.d. est. 1980), p. 1.

buckets.[45]  Three hundred and seventy one of the refugees eventually went on

hunger strike and demanded to be sent to Canada or America.  Many of the former

Chilean refugees stayed, however—at least long enough to warn Vietnamese

people about coming to Ireland.[46]

Little public attention has been directed towards the Vietnamese-Irish, save

for a brief period around the time of their arrival and periodically when intrepid

reporters explored their world for an audience unaccustomed to thinking about

what being a member of an ethnic minority in Ireland entailed.  I am thinking here

of Chris McIvor's essay 'From Vietnam to Coolock', published in *Magill* in 1987,

in which he described houses with hardly a stick of furniture due to repeated

burglaries.  Nor has much scholarly attention been directed towards the

Vietnamese-Irish.[47]  Despite this, understanding their social history and their

economic trajectory and cultural productions is significant to the development of

the inter-disciplinary field of migration research in Ireland.  Simply put, the

Vietnamese refugees of the late 1970s are now an ethnic minority with a mature

second generation, who are in turn producing a third generation.  The coming of

age of these younger generations is the focus of much of this work.

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[45] By 1958, according to Arthur Quinlan, only 9 Hungarian refugees remained in Ireland.
During the debates over the crisis involving the Hungarian refugees in *Dáil Éireann*
deputies demanded that the Government make a stand against the refugees and tell them
to 'behave themselves'.  While it was pointed out that few if any of the refugees had
been able to secure work, members of the *Dáil* still opined that should jobs become
available in the region priority should be given to 'Irish' people.  Deputy Willie Murphy,
capturing the mood, noted that, 'we have a lot of people who have not got rashers and
eggs for their breakfast but these people have got them'. *Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary
Debates: Official Report,* 162, (Dublin: Stationary Office, 1957), pp. 627-631 passim.
[46] See Arthur Quinlan, 'Memories of Earlier Refugees' *Irish Times,* 9 August 1979, p.
11.
[47] The two most important research projects on the Vietnamese-Irish are Frieda
McGovern's unpublished qualitative thesis and a report published by the former Refugee
Agency by Cathal O'Regan.  See Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland,
1979-1989' (unpublished MEd Thesis, University of Dublin, Trinity College, 1990); and

In the 25 years since the Vietnamese programme refugees were invited to Ireland a number of major shifts have occurred in national migration patterns and demographic composition, and the story of the Vietnamese-Irish can contribute an important new perspective on a larger narrative of change. In order to arrive at the starting point for this analysis it is first important to look at the initial years of reception and resettlement.

The Vietnamese-Irish man who died in August 2002 arrived in Ireland with his wife in 1979. After a brief stint as an apprentice mechanic he, like many other former Vietnamese refugees, set up a Chinese takeaway business. He ended up owning two such businesses, one in Tallaght and the other in Ballymun. Both are areas within Dublin City that are tattooed with semantic markings like 'disadvantage' and 'exclusion'—places that could be described in the contemporary Blair-speak of the British Labour party as 'challenging' environments. At the time of his death he had raised five children, ranging in age from their early teens to early twenties, in his local authority house in Tallaght. As newspaper reporters pieced together a picture of his life following his death, his daughter returned from Canada and spoke to the press: 'We regard Ireland as our home,' she said in a heavy Dublin accent.[48]

Understanding the cultural history of the Vietnamese-Irish over the last twenty-five years is a complex task. Little statistical information is available and that which is provides few clues to help answer the most important question: how do Vietnamese people in Ireland culturally, economically and socially practice everyday life? If one could, just for an instant, look through the eyes of a

Cathal O'Regan, *Report of a Survey of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities in Ireland* (Dublin: The Refugee Agency, 1998).
[48] *Sunday Business Post*, 15 December 2002.

Vietnamese-Irish adolescent today what would life in Ireland seem to be like? Hereafter in this chapter I will be relying on newspaper articles, research reports, official publications and, in particular, unpublished documents from the archives of the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE), which include a number of copies of government and interdepartmental committee reports and memoranda.

## From Ireland to Vietnam

While Vietnamese refugees didn't arrive in Ireland until 1979, as far back as 1968 the Irish Government was debating the nature and extent of the State's involvement in the humanitarian dimensions of the Vietnam War. In February of 1968 questions were asked in *Dáil Éireann* about taking Vietnamese children, which resulted in no action being taken at that stage.[49] In 1975 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (hereafter UNHCR) requested that the Irish Government resettle three Vietnamese families. This request was refused on economic grounds. In July 1976 a similar request was made, which was again refused.[50] In the minds of many in Government, and in the consciousness of the general public, there was a justification for such a viewpoint. Tim Pat Coogan once described the Irish economy post-independence as being comprised of Guinness's Brewery and a large farm and while it would be somewhat unkind to extend the image into the 1970s Ireland was, nevertheless, considering refugee

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[49] *Dáil Éireann, Ceisteanna*, vol. 232, (Dublin: Stationary Office, 14 February 1968).
[50] Minister David Andrews, in response to a *Dáil* question, outlined the Government position: 'In 1975 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) requested the Government to admit three Indo-Chinese refugee families. In July 1976 UNHCR asked the Government to participate in a programme for resettling Indo-Chinese refugees. On both occasions the Government expressed their regret that due to current economic circumstances, which had given rise to difficulties for refugees previously admitted from Chile, it would not be feasible to admit Indo-Chinese refugees.' See *Dáil Éireann Ceisteanna*, vol. 311, (Dublin: Stationary Office, 14 February 1979).

resettlement at a time when there was a £1 billion trade deficit and a looming international oil crisis.[51] Of course, politicians wearing glum expressions and publicly pinching out the lining of their empty pockets gestured as much towards questions over the distribution of wealth as it did towards any lack of wealth—this was a question of priorities after all.

However, in late 1978 the plight of the Vietnamese 'Boat People' began to receive considerable media attention. Public pressure was exerted on the Irish Government to participate in some way, and non-governmental organisations (hereafter NGOs) were at the forefront in pressing for action. In her unpublished 1990 work, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989', Frieda McGovern emphasises the important role played by the Confederation of Non-Governmental Organisations for Overseas Development (hereafter CONGOOD), the Council for the Status of Women, the Women's Voluntary Emergency Services, and the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE). These NGOs would later become the backbone of the resettlement process. It is important to recognise, however, that one cannot inflate the importance of the role of these organisations beyond the *realpolitik* that informed the decision to resettle Vietnamese refugees. I do not use the term *realpolitik* in its strict sense and thereby imply a ruthless pursuit of political objectives; rather, I apply the term in its colloquial usage to denote the pursuit of a politics 'of the real world'. I take this more soft-shelled notion to include humanitarian responsibilities, which often form very important, if

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[51] *Irish Times* columnist John Cooney captured it well: 'Ireland has taken over the presidency of the EEC at a time when the oil-rich Arab countries are playing ping pong with the Western world, and when there is widespread anxiety as to whether the nine member states can absorb the shock to their economies.' See John Cooney, 'The EEC's Rocky Road for Dublin,' *Irish Times,* 2 July 1979, p. 7.

contingent, moral and legal variables within foreign policy decisions.[52] With this

framework in mind, the relevant *Dáil* debates, press reports and other documents of

the time may be seen to reveal a government attempting an unfortunate

performance, juggling, on the one hand, the prestige of the 1979 European

Economic Community (EEC) Presidency and consequent vanguard role in the

Southeast Asian Crisis with, on the other hand, a looming world-wide depression

and a miserable domestic balance sheet. The performance was not a particularly

convincing one, and a clear point of criticism must be the small number of refugees

from Vietnam who were invited to Ireland.

While there was little evidence in 1979 to suggest that the resettlement of

substantial numbers of refugees would have incurred a significant cost to the State,

it does seem to be the case that powerful portents of future economic 'burdens'

were being detected, presumably in the entrails of the pervious experiences with

Hungarian and Chilean refugees. The fact remains that no full-scale appraisal was

ever carried out either of past experiences or to model future circumstances,

suggesting that the origin of the Government's position lay closer to soothsaying

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[52] The full humanitarian extent of this crisis was clear to all spectators during this crucial period. ASEAN countries, such as Malaysia, were towing refugee boats back out to sea in 1979. An *Irish Times* article in July described a refugee boat that had twice been forced away from shore. Malay soldiers apparently robbed and raped several refugees, and later the boat was attacked four times by Thai pirates. According to the *Irish Times,* 'A Malaysian Home Ministry spokesman dismissed the accounts as far-fetched and said 'the refugees tell all sorts of stories'.' Such ASEAN countries dubbed Hanoi's leaders as the new Nazis, resorting, in the words of Singapore's Foreign Minister, to the poor man's gas chamber—the open sea. Such reports had a powerful effect on the imagination, creating images of a genuine humanitarian disaster. See *Irish Times,* 'Boat People tell of ill treatment in ordeal at sea,' 10 July 1979, p. 4. The language used in such reports, however, seemed increasingly to strain under the weight of Biblical metaphors: throughout the summer months of 1979 the *Irish Times* carried a series of reports by Tom Fawthrop, which, described a 'never-ending flood of Indochina [*sic*] refugees' and 'invading hoards of fleeing Vietnamese'. See Tom Fawthrop, 'West awakes to Asia's 30-year-old Horror' *Irish Times,* 17 July 1979, p. 7.

than to science.[53] Frieda McGovern has suggested that the support of NGOs, the

Catholic Church and the public would have offset the costs of a larger resettlement.

While it is accurate to say that NGOs did most of the resettlement work, it was

never likely that the full slack would be taken up by such organisations in the long

run. An examination of the original documentation produced by government

committees at the time quickly reveals the limitations of the third/NGO sector's

involvement. According to one report, circa 1980, as the 'Boat People' crisis faded

from the newspapers 'so too did interest in their resettlement', and what was

needed in the longer term was 'specialist help' that went beyond material

assistance and could only properly be provided by the State.[54] As it turned out

neither the State nor the NGOs fully put their arms around the resettlement of

Vietnamese refugees, which had predictable consequences in hindsight. Lessons

were learned, however, and one may take some comfort in the fact that the

resettlement process often worked very well on a local, face-to-face level.

With the oscillation of responsibilities around resettlement, policy analysis

in this period is difficult. What may at first glance appear to be a straightforward

and parsimonious resettlement policy will lose its solidity and melt into air upon

closer inspection. Where one would reasonably expect to find policy emerging,

however hurried or misguided, here one finds only the fingerprints of a half-

hearted inertia, beginning with a reluctance to offer resettlement places and

continuing to just stop short of outright belligerence once the process had been set

into motion. In the normal course of analysing any government's actions the

question that one asks is, to kidnap a concept from René Descartes, where is the

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[53] Sub-committee on Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees, 'Agreed Report on the Third
Phase of Resettlement Programme for Vietnamese Refugees', unpublished, n.d. circa
October 1980, p. 3.

ghost that is driving the machine? In the following discussion of the Irish response

to the Southeast Asian Crisis and subsequent refugee resettlement process it will

become clear that the machinery was ill adapted and the ghost disinclined.

Yet, one must also ask whether it was possible for a better model of

resettlement to have arisen at that point in time? McGovern's suggestion that the

deeper involvement of NGOs could have offset a larger portion of the costs carried

an in-built assumption that such organisations were best placed to deliver the

resettlement process and that they were somehow immune to the

misunderstandings that characterised the State's response. On the contrary, we will

see that if the Irish Government's hand had been removed from any participation in

steering the resettlement of refugees then other interests, including those of NGOs,

would quickly have guided the process down many of the same routes. And what

of international best practice? Neither the United States nor the United Kingdom,

two of the largest resettlement countries, can now look back at the same period and

claim the laurels of success.[55]

In December 1978 the UNHCR convened a meeting in Geneva to discuss

the Southeast Asian Crisis. Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs Michael

O'Kennedy made a grant of £30,000 but did not offer resettlement places.[56] In

February of the following year the Government convened an *ad hoc* committee,

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[54] *Ibid.,* p. 3.

[55] But if we label the approach adopted in Ireland using phrases like 'half-hearted inertia' then one also has to recognise that the same label, in varying ways, could just as easily be applied in other countries. The most ready source of inspiration for the Irish case was the United Kingdom. Under the Vietnamese programme that started in 1979 around 15,000 Vietnamese 'Boat People' were resettled in the UK. Ockenden Venture, Refugee Action and the Refugee Council ran the resettlement programme. In 1988, an additional 500 Vietnamese refugees from Hong Kong camps were allowed to join family members in the UK. Many of the structural components of the Irish and UK efforts bore a marked resemblance, such as the policy of dispersing refugees.

[56] The Irish Government had previously donated £10,000 in 1977 to the UNHCR to alleviate the plight of Indo-Chinese refugees.

which included a number of NGOs, to examine the feasibility of resettling a number of so-called 'Boat People'. By describing these committees as *ad hoc* those government departments involved conveyed the temporary nature of their participation, which would end after a certain number of phases. As it turned out, the end date for participation by the State in the minds of government officials was wildly different from that in the minds of NGO workers. By 22 May 1979 the Irish Government finally agreed to offer 100 resettlement places. From that point until the arrival of the first refugees in Dublin Airport in early August the national newspapers became increasingly preoccupied with this issue.

**Figure 3: 'The Refugee Crisis'**



(Courtesy of Kyros Communications Documentary, *Refugees: the Irish Experience*, 1992.)

On 13 July celebrated columnist Anthony Cronin published an essay entitled, 'The Boat People' in the *Irish Times*. 'What the world was witnessing', he argued, was not the uncontrolled departure of tens of thousands of ordinary

Vietnamese people but the *en masse* exit of 'previously fairly prosperous and moneyed people of Chinese descent'.[57] The evidence that Cronin employed to back up this assertion was a conversation with a correspondent who had been in Southeast Asia. From this second-hand and vague information he confidently concluded: 'Many of the refugees themselves have something to hide.'[58] While the argument may appear imprudent in hindsight it resonated to a degree with the sentiments of left-leaning commentator John Pilger. At the time, Pilger suggested that there was something in the exodus that continued on from the Fall of Saigon and the rather inept attempt by the United States in 1975 to secure the departure of those aligned to the South Vietnamese Government. He proposed that, in Southeast Asian refugee camps, 'acceptable Colonels and doctors, Saigon fat cats, CIA runners and their families' were being 'weeded out from the unacceptably old and illiterate and handicapped' by the USA.[59] Doubtless there was a grain of truth in viewing the exodus from Vietnam in these terms, but the worldview of Cronin and Pilger was far too Manichean to go any length towards explaining the complexities of a mass migration from Indochina numbering several millions since the United States' leg of the war there ended. Some viewed the Vietnam War as a failed crusade against communism, while others, such as left-leaning journalists, saw it as a war of national liberation against Western imperialism; but the Vietnam War was neither and it was both; it was also a whole lot more besides. For those refugees who came to Ireland with harrowing tales of escape, made possible through the sale of prised family possessions, such as wedding rings, and the loss of their homes, the war was something even more complex: it was an intimate tale

[57] Anthony Cronin, 'The Boat People' *Irish Times*, 13 July 1979, p. 4.
[58] *Ibid.*
[59] *Ibid.*

of duty and family embedded in an abstract and fractured story of geo-politics that told of more than a century of cultural transformation.

Later in the same newspaper, Seong Loh, a Chinese-Irish woman, provided a more sober insight. She championed a fairly popular perspective amongst overseas Chinese at the time that the vast bulk of the refugee flow consisted of Sino-Vietnamese— Chinese-Vietnamese people, sometimes known as *Hoa*— which indicated that the Hanoi Government was following a definite policy of expelling people of Chinese descent from Vietnam. The Sino-Vietnamese had become, according to Seong Loh, 'the country's scapegoat'.[60] While such commentaries on the Southeast Asian Crisis were available in the national press the dearth of media writing and letters to the editor, in particular, addressed far more insular concerns. These letters often echoed the predictions of the Irish Government's soothsayers and sought to outline the dimensions of the 'burden' that would soon arrive.[61]

Following a meeting of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries with EEC in Bali, Minister for Foreign Affairs Michael O'Kennedy suggested that by taking more and more refugees Ireland and other European countries were in fact encouraging their expulsion. He noted that there were over 1.2 million ethnic Chinese remaining in Vietnam at this time and refused to be a

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[60] Seong Loh, 'Non-Integration Behind the Hoa Plight' *Irish Times*, 16 July 1979, p. 7.
[61] While representatives of NGOs frequently wrote to the national papers decrying the level of the Irish response to the crisis, members of the public also voiced frequent objections to resettlement. For example, in one letter-to-the-editor the question: what about 'our own Boat People?' was asked, i.e. members of the travelling community and the poor, and further on the author demanded to know, 'did anyone ever stop to think who these people are, and how much money they spent to get on the boat?' A subsequent letter writer wondered: 'Will they contribute anything to the Irish economy? In essence what have they to offer Ireland? With the country in its present dilemma it is just not fair to take on the burden ... when it is so hard to provide for ourselves ... [*Concern*] should look closer to home and cease pontificating about the need and indeed the nobility of helping

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party to any policy of pushing them out. Shortly thereafter the EEC voted to cut off direct aid to Vietnam and instead decided to send aid to refugees in ASEAN countries. It was approximated that nearly 350,000 refugees were at this stage in camps in Southeast Asia. On 21 July 1979 a conference was held in Geneva where it was reported that 1 million refugees had fled Vietnam since 1975. The flow had at this stage already begun to ebb, however, with a fall of 95% reported in some receiving regions such as Hong Kong. At the conference the Vietnamese Government formally agreed to help stem the illegal departures.

Ireland's presidency of the EEC in 1979 made this country's response uncomfortably visible. Many delegates at the Geneva conference announced dramatic increases in resettlement places in their countries, and a visibly naked Ireland offered to double its original offer. This sounded impressive until the press noticed that the combined figure was totalling just over 200 persons—little more than a fig leaf. The media response was predictable, with an *Irish Times* editorial describing the State 'ambling to the rescue'.[62] *Fine Gael's* Jim O'Keefe, the opposition spokesperson on Foreign Affairs noted, 'the government would receive the least number of refugees which would enable them to save face abroad'. He also pointed out that the Irish were 'glad indeed to have the hand of welcome extended to our ancestors when famine stalked this land'.[63]

The criticisms raged on in the newspapers. Historian David N. Doyle suggested that we owed a debt to China and should take Sino-Vietnamese refugees by way of an apology for supporting the exclusion of Chinese immigrants from the

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the Vietnamese'. See *Irish Times*, 18 July 1979, p.10; and, *Irish Times,* 26 July 1979, p. 11.

[62] *Irish Times,* 8 August 1979, p. 4.

[63] *Ibid.*

USA in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Irish people acted like 'evil green barbarians'.[64]

Doyle argued for more resettlement places as a positive contribution to Irish business and culture, suggesting that we were in fact importing 'a ready-made creative minority', and 'politically, they would never forget: naturalised their very grandchildren would doubtless continue to vote *Fianna Fáil*'. It is unlikely that great heed was paid to arguments such as this. The same cannot be said, however, for the substantial weight of the Catholic Church in the form of Eamonn Casey, then Bishop of Galway and at the time Bishop's Secretary of the IECE. Bishop Casey publicly decried the 'meagre response', appealed to the Christian tradition, and demanded an increase to 1000 if, comparatively, 'we are to do as well as the UK'.[65]

Attention began to turn to the *lacunae* of resettlement in Ireland. 212 refugees were due to arrive in August. The initial proposal was for the refugees to be housed in a special wing of Blanchardstown Hospital from August 1979 until October of that year. A number of offers of resettlement places were made at this stage. The Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE) had apparently secured accommodation for 850 refugees in various reception centres. However, it should be noted that some offers were not as practical: Donegal Vocational Education Committee offered 20 places with work in the turf cutting industry, and

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[64] *Irish Times*, 31 July 1979, p. 10.

[65] A chorus of approval followed the Bishop's challenging statement. A bizarre form of applause came from *Irish Times* columnist John Healy who reflected on the 'Episcopal hand across the puss' received by the Government. Healy asked why nobody had reminded the EEC Council of Ministers that: 'We, the Irish, were the first boat people'. He further recalled the work of Donogh O'Malley, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance at the very first meeting of the World Bank, as an example to inspire us all to acts of statesmanship. At the meeting, two African delegates in national dress pledged £3m from their countries. According to Healy, 'O'Malley jumped up and bellowed '£5m from Ireland'.' When his officials objected, O'Malley apparently replied: 'No f**king black in a football jersey is going to put Ireland down.' See *Irish Times*, 4 August 1979, p. 3.

Councillor Seán Gallagher of Donegal proposed Arranmore Island off the North West Coast be used as a reception location—becoming some sort of reservation, presumably.

Meanwhile back in Southeast Asia, a strange controversy began to break the surface. It appeared that a substantial number of the refugees assigned to Ireland were refusing to go. Apparently, they would have preferred to be resettled in the USA, Canada or in other countries where relatives had already become established. When the first 58 refugees finally arrived in Ireland in early August reports indicated that at least the same number had gone on the run somewhere in Shamshuipo camp in Hong Kong. Much of this may be explained by the relative lack of information provided to the refugees about their resettlement places. The administrative procedures for admitting the refugees were co-ordinated by the Irish Embassy in New Delhi, together with missionaries, aid workers and the UNHCR in Southeast Asia. It seems that many believed that despite refusing a place they could be resettled in the USA, which was not the case.[66] In a revealing description of the first refugees arriving in Dublin Airport, journalist, Maeve Kennedy described 'one elderly man [*carrying*] a straw hat and a palm leaf fan, which he apparently believed he would need in scorching Ireland'.[67] Members of the group expressed the view that the one shock they had on arrival was that no one had informed them that Ireland was a cold country. Reflecting back on his arrival in Ireland Quang Van Vu recalled to *Magill's* Chris McIvor,

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[66] The *Irish Independent* reported that some refugees had refused to go to Ireland because they understood that there was a war going on in the north of the country. See *Irish Independent,* 10 August 1979, p 1.

[67] Maeve Kennedy, 'Boat People Arrive After Two-day Trip,' *Irish Times,* 10 August 1979, p. 1.

... none of us knew very much about where we were going or even exactly
where it was. When we arrived in Dublin Airport we thought it was only a
stopping off point. We did not believe that a national airport of a country
could be so small.[68]

**Figure 4: 'Vietnamese Refugees Arrive in Dublin, 1979'**



(Courtesy of the Vietnamese-Irish Association)

When the Vietnamese refugees arrived they were initially housed in a

private wing of Blanchardstown Hospital. Only a handful spoke any English. It is

important to note that there were two major phases of migration from Vietnam. The

first phase from 1975 onwards was comprised of a substantial number of elite and

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[68] Chris McIvor, 'From Vietnam to Coolock' *Magill Annual* (1987), p. 44. See also an
interview with one of the original refugees, Tia Wien, recorded by Radio Telifis Eireann
(RTE) in 1979, www.rte.ie/radio/radio75/soundbytes.html 30 August 1979.

well-educated ethnic Vietnamese (though ethnic Vietnamese is in itself a problematic category). Some were Catholics; others were Buddhists or Confucian. Most of Confucian background engaged in ancestor worship (sometimes known as generation worship or ancestor veneration), but that particular cultural practice is widely held across a variety of religious faiths in Southeast Asia. The second phase of migration from 1979 onwards included a significant majority of poor, ethnic Chinese. They spoke Hong Kong Chinese, Cantonese and Mandarin. The majority were unskilled, had little formal education and, in some cases, were illiterate in their own language. The refugees who were resettled in Ireland belonged, for the most part, to the latter group. The internal differentiations in these population movements make comparative analysis almost impossible—a problem compounded both by the small number resettled in Ireland and the variety of resettlement strategies adopted in European countries and in the United States.

**Reception**

In the initial group of 58 that arrived in Dublin on 9/10 August 1979 from camps in Hong Kong, 10 families were represented in ages that ranged from newborn infants to a grandmother of 79 years. There were 23 children under the age of 12, and 6 teenagers. 51 more refugees, again from camps in Hong Kong, arrived on 20 September. This second group was also comprised of a number of youths, with 21 persons less than 12 years of age, and 5 teenagers. Later, 99 more arrived from Malaysia, including 57 youths, with a follow-on migration of 4 refugees on 19 November 1979. These 212 refugees represented the initial resettlement group, which was augmented by the addition of a further 207 persons from 1981 to 1989, who migrated through the Family Reunification Scheme.

Thus, at end of 1989 there were 408 Vietnamese persons living in Ireland excluding those that emigrated or died.[69]

For the first seven years of the resettlement process the former Vietnamese refugees were legally 'aliens' from an employers' perspective. It was not until 1986 that the Irish Government facilitated their naturalisation under the *Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1986.* This was a dark episode in the resettlement story: the first decade of the process can only be recorded as a chronicle of heroic efforts by individual government representatives, NGO workers, and Vietnamese leaders, all embedded in a wider context of official and public inattention. Before the arrival of refugees in February 1979, the Minister for Foreign Affairs met with representatives of the Irish Red Cross Society and interested voluntary organisations with a view to discussing practical arrangements for reception and resettlement. The Department of Defence was given the overall responsibility by the Government for the resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees in Ireland and established the Southeast Asian Refugee Co-ordinating Committee to incorporate NGOs on a temporary basis. While the Irish Red Cross agreed to handle the reception phase, the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE) secured accommodation and furniture—this was funded by £120,000 collected in Dublin churches throughout 1979. This considerable sum testifies to both the public impact of the Southeast Asian Crisis and the powerful role of the Catholic Church in mobilising the third/NGO sector response. Meetings between the Southeast Asian Refugee Co-ordinating Committee and Government resulted in a framework plan for resettlement, which the Minister for Defence Bobby Molloy outlined for

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[69]Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 126.

the *Dáil* in December 1979. He suggested that there would be three stages, the first of which was

> ... the establishment of a holding centre where refugees would be accommodated for a few months, and that would be established by the [*Irish*] Red Cross. Certain formalities would be undertaken while they were there, such as health checks and documentation. Intermediate accommodation would be the next stage. It is expected that they would be accommodated in the intermediate accommodation for perhaps one-and-a-half to two years. After that the long-term integration settlement would take place.[70]

The reception phase, which fell under the remit of the Irish Red Cross, was managed from 1980 onwards by a working group called the Vietnamese Resettlement Committee (VRC), whose members were drawn for the most part from the Southeast Asian Refugee Co-ordinating Committee. The VRC was comprised of a Chair and Secretary from the Department of Defence, representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE) and CONGOOD, together with the Irish Red Cross itself. From early on the government departments made plain that it was their intention to act as facilitators only and they resisted financing many of the Committee's plans. This, it was felt, was the role of voluntary organisations. Frieda McGovern quotes Fr. P.J. Byrne, Secretary to the IECE, who remarked that, as far as he understood, the Government felt that it had been pressurised by NGOs into taking the refugees and it was now the responsibility of those organisations to look after them.[71] But this, of course, is not the full story. McGovern also argues that a strategy of distancing was in evidence. The Government was more than aware of the potential for another embarrassing incident over refugee issues, such

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[70] *Dáil Éireann, Ceisteanna*, vol. 311 (Dublin: Stationary Office, 14 February 1979), p. 1172.

as the fiasco surrounding the hunger strike by Hungarian refugees. She quotes a memorandum from the Department of Defence to the IECE, which stated that the Department was 'very worried about resettlement because of its political implications in 2 years time'.[72] This example draws attention to just how Kafkaesque this entire episode was: the Irish Government welcomed the participation of NGOs in refugee resettlement, yet blamed these same NGOs for creating the situation of resettlement in the first place; the State foresaw long-term costs that NGOs could not meet and used this as an excuse to limit resettlement places on the grounds that smaller numbers could be well-provided for and, yet, put few resources in place in the early years thereby adding to long-term costs.

As mentioned above, members of the initial group of 58 refugees who arrived in August were housed in two units of James Connolly Memorial Hospital in Blanchardstown, Dublin. In October 1979, when a further group arrived, the Christian Brothers Order in St. Mary's, Swords, Co. Dublin provided a second reception centre. Many refugees left the Centres after just a few months, allowing for the Swords Centre to be closed, while others remained for nearly a full year in Blanchardstown. Immediately upon arrival in the reception centres the refugees were subjected to the usual medical examinations, interviews to ascertain family background and assessments to gauge the suitability of individuals for future employment. After the first month English language tuition and classes on host country orientation began. On the surface then the reception phase resembled similar processes in many other countries, while below the surface a more haphazard system obtained. For example, special education teachers, primarily

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[71] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 152.
[72] Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE), 'Memo', 10 August 1979, unpublished.

trained in the education of the Deaf, delivered the English language tuition, and both the Vietnamese individuals in the classes and the teachers involved found the whole process unsatisfactory.

Many Vietnamese refugees also had less than happy memories of James Connolly Memorial Hospital in Blanchardstown. Social scientists have long noted the capacity of large-scale institutions to produce effects over and beyond the intentions of those who staff them. [73] Systems that utilise vouchers and allowances—in effect pocket money—which were in operation in this instance often cause resentment whether they are well run or not. But in this case such reactions seem to have been exacerbated by the Irish Red Cross refusing to countenance any form of internal agency among the Vietnamese. Early on, newspapers quoted hospital staff and Irish Red Cross workers expressing some disquiet about the manner in which the refugees quickly became self-sufficient, 'virtually taking over'. [74] In a report on the reception phase of the process, the Irish Red Cross noted,

> While the operation of the Centres was successful it did have many internal problems, mainly due to the lifestyle of these refugees. The emergence of 'Leaders' in both Centres caused problems. They tried to exercise a certain control of their own people, which caused discontent – resentment to authority. This was to be expected with over 100 people living in each Centre, but because we had got to know them and their devious methods, control was maintained. [75]

This situation, revealed in official documentation, is confirmed in qualitative interviews with former employees of the NGOs involved in the reception phase. One interviewee noted how difficulties often arose in the reception centres from

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[73] Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (London and New York: Harmondsworth and Penguin, 1968).
[74] *Irish Times,* 'Refugees Reported Happy,' 11 August 1979, p. 2.

unexpected sources. The corporate style of family decision-making that the refugees favoured ran counter to the individualising systems in the reception centres. Also, heads of families *seemed* to possess Svengali-like powers over women and young persons and, according to my informant, deep suspicions began to take root as interactions between staff and younger refugees were, and I quote, regularly 'thwarted' by 'sinister' elders.

**Resettlement**

Many Western European governments have publicly expressed a fear of large spatial concentrations of immigrants. The logic of this position is that such concentrations would prevent the integration of immigrants speedily into mainstream society, particularly when the immigrant population can reasonably be expected to occupy lower social and economic niches. In the popular imagination the term 'ghetto' is often associated with migration. The etymology of the word ghetto is hardly important—these days it can signify a flashy looking pair of running shoes or a particularly large necklace. But to many policy makers and some social scientists it is laden with meaning: it stands for low income, underclass neighbourhoods that lurk in the midst of metropolitan plenty. Always shrouded in ethnic difference, the ghetto seems somehow to stand for the price of cosmopolitan living. Musterd *et al* (1998) have established and illustrated that this policy makers' fear of ghettoisation is excessive when it comes to European cities.[76] Hysteria of a kind tends then to cloud how one perceives urban areas that are labelled as ghettos. To disperse that cloud is to reveal nuances of residence,

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[75] Irish Red Cross, 'Vietnamese Refugees Report,' unpublished, n.d., p. 4.
[76] S. Musterd, W. Ostendorf and M. Breebaart, *Multi Ethnic Metropolis: Patterns and Policies* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998).

migration and economic and social mobility that bear close scrutiny. There is a strong literature that illustrates that the so-called ghetto is, in fact, usually a dynamic and fast changing environment. Residential careers tend to show only brief entries for such neighbourhoods, and inter-ethnic differences also confuse the popular image.[77]

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism, however, is of the worldview that allows the image of 'ethnic ghetto' to be conjured up. In order to have such an image one requires a mental map in which immigrants cross borders and inhabit the poorest neighbourhoods, fill the lowest paid jobs or seek unemployment benefit and thereby contribute to a decline into an ethnically charged, Hobbsian existence. This way of thinking is probably as old as the city itself: in the 19$^{th}$ century the social inquiries of Henry Mayhew's *Labour and the London Poor* and Friedrich Engels's *Conditions of the Working Classes* both imagined cities with dark underbellies filled with decidedly ethnic contents. Today an alternative view has emerged, which seems to be a distorted mirror reflection, in which the world is seen more and more as being constituted not by borders but by border crossings. This popular view suggests that today populations are fractured and found stretched out across nation-states. What first appeared to be a dark side of urbanisation—ghettos cut off from so-called 'inclusion', filled with poverty, crime and even 'the Irish'—may now appear to be more dynamic and internally differentiated; they also appear not to be local phenomena. The most trenchant critique of the use of the term ghetto has been the argument that what we are now talking about is more often than not a node in transnational space and frequently a temporary one for those people involved. While this view can just as frequently

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[77] Michael Poulsen, 'Are there Ethnic Enclaves/Ghettos in English Cities?" *Urban*

run to excess, it still manages to cast a sufficiently critical eye over notions like ethnic assimilation and 'ghettoisation' to make them appear *passé* at best and iffy at worst.

The importance of this discussion in understanding the resettlement of the Vietnamese programme refugees should not be understated. Frieda McGovern quotes a report to the Minister of Foreign Affairs from a working party set up at a meeting in February 1979, which suggested that it was 'desirable to try to ensure that refugee families did not congregate in one small area in such a way as to diminish the incentive for them to integrate quickly and fully into the community'.[78] She further records interviews with government officials working with the refugees who greatly feared that integration would be slowed down if they did anything to facilitate the creation of a ghetto area. It is noteworthy that this policy came from the *ad hoc* committees that surrounded the resettlement process. NGO workers and government officials who, in the majority of cases, were guided by a strong sense of justice and of doing what was best for those involved peopled such committees. These individuals would later come to be deeply involved in the lives of Vietnamese-Irish people. Yet, on this issue the approach of NGOs and government representatives was curiously similar.[79] A senior representative of the IECE, for example, felt that the refugees should go to 'strong provincial areas', where a personal level of care and attention could be given, rather than to anonymous Dublin housing estates.[80]

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*Studies*, vol. 39, 4, (2002), pp. 591-619.

[78] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 170.

[79] Sub-committee on Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees, 'Agreed Report on the Third Phase of Resettlement Programme for Vietnamese Refugees' (circa, 1980), p. 2, d, notes that 'ideally, each family would be supported by a responsible local organisation/community'.

[80] *Ibid.*

One cannot put the resettlement policy that emerged for the Vietnamese refugees down to any one ghost in the machine then (to borrow again from Descartes): this policy was too thoroughly haunted for any such simplistic analysis. The uncanny presence of the image of ghettoisation was certainly there, as was a pastoral prejudice towards the warm welcome of 'strong provincial areas', but so also was a fairly straightforward economic equation, the logic of which was that dispersal equalled a lessening of pressure on services in any central area of migrant concentration. This policy also obtained in other resettlement countries at this time, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, as already noted. Dispersal could hardly be conceived of as a success in those countries and doubly so in Ireland where the numbers being resettled were far lower. One normally finds that with dispersal policies ethnic minority numbers are so low as to make additional service provision, such as language and cultural support, unfeasible, thus increasing the likelihood of so-called 'downward assimilation' or, ironically, remigration becomes an alternative for refugees, which is exactly what occurred in the United Kingdom, Ireland and in some contexts in the United States. Clearly, the availability of housing and resettlement offers was also in the minds of the planners. The majority of the integrated resettlement solutions were to be found outside Dublin. The unpublished minutes of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors Meeting of 24 June 1980 gives us this insight into the accommodation listing *du jour* for the Vietnamese refugees:

> A family of five in Tallaght (house owned by Daughters of Charity); a
> family of eight living in a convent (owned by the daughters of charity) in
> Blackrock; two families in mobile homes, Carysfort College; two families
> in Goldenbridge, Inchicore; one family in Skerries – OMI; one family in
> Priorswood (Sacred Heart); two families in Lucan (private); one family in
> Gate Lodge, Mercy Convent, Ballyronan; one family in Ballyboden
> (Augustinians) – not yet moved; one family in Sandymount (YWCA). ...

> Two families in rented accommodation in Tralee; five families in Co. Cork: two in City; two in Middleton; one in Little Island; two families in Sligo – Elphin Diocesan Project; one family in Tuam (Presentation); one family in Chapelizod (private) – not yet moved; one family – Red Cross, Dublin; two families in Drogheda (Daughters of Charity); one family in Blackrock (private). Offers under investigation: Waterford, Dungarvan, Dundalk, and Dublin.[81]

In such locations, local voluntary support groups were established in each relevant parish and accommodation needs were met and finance was raised. Therefore, each local situation varied considerably: in some areas religious orders such as the Sisters of Mercy were at the vanguard of local voluntary support, in others, such as Cork, the Irish Red Cross itself played a key role. The style of accommodation was also quite disparate, ranging from private houses to rented flats and mobile homes. From the summer of 1980 onwards, many of those families housed in unsatisfactory or temporary accommodation, particularly in the Dublin area, were relocated to smaller Irish towns. At this time the archival documents of the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE) and other historical sources indicate a severe breakdown in the resettlement machinery, which had serious consequences for the people concerned.

**Compassion Fatigue**

By 1982 signs that the wheels had come off the resettlement machine were everywhere. By this stage most of the work was ostensibly being done by the Vietnamese Resettlement Committee (VRC), which was co-ordinated differently at national and local levels. At national level, co-ordination was carried out by the *ad hoc* VRC comprised of a Chair and Secretary from the Department of Defence, representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Irish Episcopal

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[81] Conference of Major Religious Superiors Meeting, unpublished, IECE archives, 24

Commission for Emigrants (IECE) and CONGOOD, together with the Irish Red Cross. Volunteers and representatives of the constituent NGO members of the VRC carried out work at the local level, though all concerned heaped praise on individual civil servants charged with specific responsibilities. Trouble began with signs that the VRC itself was winding down. In September of 1982 Michael Pelly S.J., a senior IECE representative, reported that the National Chair of the VRC had informed those involved in resettlement in Cork that 'they could no longer expect help from Dublin' and that no meeting would be arranged to explain the circumstances. Pelly further recorded that all activities ceased in Cork when the NGO workers resigned all involvement *en masse*.[82] Last minute IECE intervention put things back in place at the local level. However, a balanced and objective account of this incident is difficult to achieve.

In a report to the IECE later in 1982, Pelly again laid out the NGOs' perspective on the resettlement process. He reflected on the general dissatisfaction with the process expressed to him by virtually everyone involved and including those civil servants working on the ground: 'Why this Department [*Defence*] was chosen, rather than Health, Welfare, Education, Enriornment [*sic*], or even Foreign Affairs, has been asked time and again.'[83] He bitterly noted a degree of mismanagement and 'feckless inactivity' at the heart of the VRC:

> The Resettlement Committee, established in December 1979, had shrunk from an unwieldy *ad hoc* Committee to one of five: two from the Department of Defence, and one each from the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants and the Irish Red Cross Society. ... In May '82, the Committee was small enough to be

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June 1980, p. 2.

[82] 'Interim Report', unpublished IECE paper, 1982, pp. 1-4 passim.

[83] *Ibid.*

controlled, managed, and even put out of business by the simple trick of not convening it![84]

From July 1982 until March 1984 there was only one meeting of the VRC. But while Pelly could charge that this reflected a determined effort 'to abort the programme, at whatever cost to the refugees' on 'the arbitrary whim of one or two Civil Servants', neither the VRC nor the Irish Government could be reproached for reneging on promises made, simply because they had made too few.[85] In December 1979 Minister for Defence Bobby Molloy outlined to the *Dáil* his Department's three-staged resettlement plan, which stretched from initial reception to intermediate accommodation and on to unspecified long-term integration settlement. This policy operated via a law of diminishing resources, whereby the more complex the issues became the less the Department would have to do with them and the less money would be available to meet them. This was, in effect, the Department of Defence's plan to escape an open-ended situation in which many felt imprisoned. By 1984 the escape plan had been carried out with a certain amount of flair: the Department of Defence had left the VRC, and now both prisoner and prison were gone.

**Becoming a Minority**

In 1983 Pat Nolan wrote an article in the journal *Management* sketching what he saw as an emergent enterprise spirit amongst the Vietnamese peoples in Ireland. The article was to be widely read and commented on. He argued that a model minority was emergent and pointed to the fact that several refugees had acquired jobs in the clothing and jewellery industries within the first few months of

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[84] *Ibid.*

resettlement. Quoting a civil servant, he further noted that, as of 1983, 86% of

heads of families had found employment and few had 'been compelled to accept

employment below their qualifications'.[86] Nolan drew readers' attention to the

distinct 'racial mix' in evidence, with almost 70 percent of the former refugees

being Sino-Vietnamese. From this he proposed that they would succeed in Ireland

because they would be compelled to 'put work first'.[87] Just as Kirby Miller once

argued that Irish-Americans suffered from a *Gaelic*/Catholic deficit in North

America so, in a distorted reflection of such theories, Nolan was arguing that some

strange blend of racial stock and family structure was going to give poor Sino-

Vietnamese refugees a leg up Ireland's business ladder—a Vietnamese-Irish

endowment, so to speak.

Stereotypes, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, are not simple things: they carry

history and power relations with them.[88] We need to go no further than Richard

Ned Lebow's celebrated study of 19th century British attitudes towards Ireland and

the Irish, *White Britain and Black Ireland*, to see how something so simple as a

stereotype can have very 'real' consequences. To illustrate his thesis, one may

draw attention to one or two themes.[89] For example, Lebow makes the point that a

popular 19th century view that Ireland was an innately violent nation, which found

its way into the publications of the day, acted as a block to understanding the

sources of political violence in Ireland.[90] This is, of course, an over simplification

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[85] *Ibid.*

[86] Pat Nolan, 'Out of the East ... the Spirit of Enterprise' *Management* (1983), p. 17

[87] *Ibid.*

[88] Homi Bhabha, 'The Other Question' in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (eds.), pp. 370-379 (London and New Deli: Sage and the Open University Press, 1999).

[89] Richard Ned Lebow, *White Britain and Black Ireland: The Influence of Stereotypes on Colonial Policy* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976).

[90] As an example, *Punch* once suggested that the average Irish tribunal was composed of 'accuser and accused—twelve paces apart to prevent accidents—a couple of judges and a

of the processes at stake. But, more interestingly, Lebow also notes how stereotypes tend to pull together an almost circular list of traits: in Victorian Britain the Irish emerged at different points as inherently violent, childish, emotional, and onwards until one came to relatively benign traits (traits that, it could be argued, found their way into the symbolic inventory of the *Gaelic* revival), which could, nonetheless, never be fully rescued from malevolence.

Asian entrepreneurship, family structure, and dedication to achievement—in short, the myth of the model minority—are the stereotypical counterpoint to the image of migration cast by the shadow of the ethnic ghetto. Even during the time of the Southeast Asian Crisis, *Guardian* columnist Martin Woollacott described 'shrewd' Vietnamese refugees who were thrown up on a deserted beach in Malaysia quickly setting about chopping down all the trees to sell as firewood to the locals.[91] Just as the model minority is abstractly related to the ghetto so too is the 'shrewd' Vietnamese refugee, described by Martin Woollacott, a stereotypical step away from the 'sinister elders' with their 'devious methods' found in Blanchardstown Hospital in 1979. But we should remind ourselves again of Homi Bhabha's point that such works of the social mind are not simple things. One

surgeon'. See *Punch*, 1 (1841), p. 153. It is worth noting, however, that in recent years the historian Roy Foster has demonstrated that a greater level of complexity is evident in British representations of Ireland in 19th century popular publications. See Roy Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Allen Lane and Penguin, 1993).

[91] See Martin Woollacott, 'The Boat People' *The Guardian,* 3 December 1977, p. 5. One should note that the model minority stereotype has some considerable history when it comes to Vietnamese people. The potent image of the Asian entrepreneur can be found as far back as the 1920s work of Frank Eldridge. While working for the United States' Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce Eldridge wrote a book called *Oriental Trade Methods* in which he noted that the Vietnamese 'exhibit an amount of intelligence and tenacity of purpose generally lacking in typical people of South-eastern Asia'. See Alexander Woodside, 'Vietnamese History: Confucianism, Colonialism and the Struggle for Independence' in Donald W.P. Elliott, Gerald Cannon Hickey, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Hue Tam Ho Tai and Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture and Society* (New York: The Asia Society, 1985), p. 4.

could argue that stereotypes do not stand in front of reality, blocking our view of it; stereotypes have a reality *in* power and knowledge: they shaped the way NGO workers and journalists saw Vietnamese refugees. Throughout the course of this work I will show some of the ways in which stereotypes shape the vision Vietnamese-Irish people have of themselves.

However, the most interesting thing about Pat Nolan's argument was the manner in which the socio-economic reality he investigated conformed to his preconceptions. In order to support his argument, he documented three case studies: an ethnic Vietnamese master jeweller who set up a shop in Sligo; a university-trained acupuncturist and herbal medicine practitioner who established a practice in Dundalk; and, a skilled cook who was by then working with family from a take-away van on a Dublin roundabout. Ireland did not impose on the UNHCR explicit skills criteria for entry into the country. For many, and most especially for those in the NGO sector, there was a moral responsibility not to impose criteria. Indeed, an early resettlement report bemoaned 'the almost complete lack of a knowledge of English and the absence of work skills ... coupled with different standards of education' amongst the Vietnamese refugee population.[92] Therefore, all three case studies are somewhat anomalous in that they stand out in their comparative success. Nonetheless, the case studies do capture, however accidentally, something of significance, namely the emergent niche for Vietnamese refugees in Ireland that was and still is the ethnic food business. Two years later then *Irish Times* columnist Ronit Lentin followed up with a darker picture of life for this 'model minority'. 'Ireland's 303 Vietnamese are housed, but

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[92] Sub-committee on Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees, 'Agreed Report on the Third Phase of Resettlement Programme for Vietnamese Refugees' (circa, 1980), p. 6.

not settled, not hungry, yet not integrated', she argued.[93]   Lentin drew on the

experience of a key player in the resettlement process, Michael Pelly of the Irish

Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE).  He noted: 'Most of Ireland's boat

people are still adrift, not on the sea … but as a result of us forgetting them; they

are yesterday's news headlines.'[94]   The picture was a dark one indeed in Lentin and

Pelly's eyes.  This was a community fractured along ethnic lines—North and

South, and ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese—educational differences,

and differences in social class and status.  The Department of Defence was

withdrawing from involvement in resettlement at the same time that the crisis that

brought refugees to Ireland was fading from memory.  But the controversy over the

role of the Vietnamese Resettlement Committee and the continuing tussles between

the State and NGOs were by now playing second fiddle to two related forces on the

ground: firstly, the beginnings of a secondary migration of Vietnamese refugees

back to Dublin; and, secondly, by 1982 the Vietnamese had become involved in the

takeaway business.[95]

As noted earlier, the Vietnamese refugees had been resettled through a

policy of dispersal to locations as diverse as Tralee, Tuam and Dundalk. In many

cases, no field workers were provided either by the State or the relevant NGOs, and

the families were left isolated and in the care of small numbers of local NGO

workers.  Some time in the latter half of 1982, large Vietnamese families residing

in Tralee, Tuam and elsewhere suddenly vanished and reappeared on the radar

shortly after in private rented accommodation in Dublin, much to the amazement of

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[93] Ronit Lentin, 'Five Years of Trial for Vietnamese Boat People' *Irish Times*, 25 April 1984, p. 11.
[94] *Ibid.*
[95] Refugee Resettlement Committee, 'Report on Refugee Resettlement for 1987' (unpublished report, 1987), p. 6.

other Vietnamese families who had for some time been lobbying quietly for relocation to Dublin. According to an IECE paper written in September 1982, this example acted to pass on the 'the migrant itch' to other families, and soon dispersal was rendered obsolete.[96] As one refugee, Quang Van Vu recalled to Magill's Chris McIvor, '… the people in Tralee were very nice to us but how could I, with my poor English and lack of training, hope to get a job in an area of the country with large unemployment problems of its own?'[97] This secondary migration was not always welcomed, appreciated or understood by the resettlement workers involved, however. According to the same report, faces were dyed red with anger and tinged with embarrassment:

> Serious upsets have … been caused by secondary resettlement—where a family, for various reasons, suddenly uproots and goes elsewhere leaving chaos behind them and causing it where they go. There have been several such situations. Quite recently a family set off for England threatening to bring a charge of maltreatment against Ireland before the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees through his Office in London![98]

Just as the escalating secondary migration was causing difficulties so too was that most praise-worthy of ethnic traits: entrepreneurship. Ronit Lentin's press report focused on this aspect of resettlement as it displayed the darker side of trying to get ahead while being a member of a minority in Ireland. She saw the Vietnamese being 'pushed' into this takeaway business niche rather than being supported in fully utilising their skills. The Vietnamese were, early on, running foul of the police over licensing laws, the health authorities were worried over standards, and their neighbours complained about noise. More ominously local gangsters in poor Dublin housing estates were demanding £100 per night or

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[96] Michael Pelly, 'Interim Report' (unpublished IECE paper, 1982), no pagination.
[97] Chris McIvor, 'From Vietnam to Coolock' *Magill Annual* (1987), p. 44.

burning the takeaway vans and beating up the occupants. In 1983 Michael Pelly

echoed Lentin's concerns and feelings:

> The mushroom growth of Chinese food mobile takeaways led to such
> things as protection rackets, arson, [and] robbery with violence, conspiracy,
> slander, intimidation and harassment of many kinds against our guests. Two
> young men are still recovering after treatment in hospital for severe injury
> and robbery, and two older ones are in Peamount Hospital with TB as a
> result of the institutional violence of cramped living quarters. For the same
> reason one little lady of 58 had to have two lobes of her right lung removed
> in St Vincent's Hospital.[99]

**Figure 5: 'Vietnamese-Irish Takeaway Van, 1982'**



(Courtesy of Thai Family)

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[98] Michael Pelly, 'Interim Report', no pagination.
[99] Michael Pelly, 'The Vietnamese Resettlement Committee' (unpublished IECE Paper, 1983), p. 4.

Pelly concluded: 'Their enemies are not now the Thai pirates, nor the storms at sea, nor hunger and thirst, but successive waves of savage, unhindered human lawlessness which they must fight to survive.'[100]

Pressure was exerted on the Government by NGOs to refocus efforts to co-ordinate the further resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees. In late 1985 the Refugee Resettlement Committee (forerunner of the Refugee Agency and later the Reception and Integration Agency) was established along with the Policy Advisory Committee (PAC). The Refugee Resettlement Committee was comprised of a representative of the Department of Foreign Affairs, an executive co-ordinator, a representative of the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants (IECE) representative of the Irish Red Cross, while the Policy Advisory Committee was chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs and had observer status for the IECE, Irish Red Cross, UNHCR and CONGOOD.[101]

In many ways then the indifference with which Hungarian and Chilean refugees were met in Ireland was matched for a time in the experiences with Vietnamese refugees, with one crucial difference: from 1979 onwards the State's response to resettlement started on a not-so-steep curve towards putting in place the requisite infrastructure for refugee resettlement in Ireland. For example, the secondary migration of Vietnamese refugees has had an important impact on resettlement policy in Ireland. It is now recognised that ghettoisation often conjures up images that are at odds with the benefits, such as mutual support, which often accrue from proximity. In Ireland this maturity in policy has been reflected in the approach to the resettlement of the Bosnian programme refugees who arrived in Ireland in the 1990s.

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[100] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Outside of attempts to successfully resettle them, the Vietnamese peoples themselves, who had early on displayed a penchant for micro organisation, were steadily putting shape on a settlement and livelihood profile. By the late 1980s the majority of the former programme refugees were living in the large-scale local authority housing estates that surround Dublin City, specifically in Coolock, Tallaght and Clondalkin. Within these areas of disadvantage, black spots of up to 80% unemployment were not uncommon. According to the Refugee Resettlement Committee's annual report for 1989, of the 408 Vietnamese residing in Ireland 36% were dependent on welfare support, 40% were partially dependent, and 25% had independent livelihoods. Simply put, most were either unemployed or self-employed.

**Before the Tiger**

Frieda McGovern consistently made the point that language acquisition was the dominant problem throughout the first decade of the resettlement process. Once the refugees moved out of reception centres language tuition ceased. Indeed, one refugee recalled that the only language tuition received was with Spanish students on a summer visit. Circa 1980 the 'Agreed Report on the Third Phase of Resettlement Programme for Vietnamese Refugees', produced by the Sub-Committee on Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees, contained the following rather naked statement on language instruction: 'Formal instruction in English ceased when the refugees left the reception centres. It is not considered that schoolgoing [*sic*] children will need further special instruction in English.'[102] This

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[101] The Policy Advisory Committee first met on 22 December 1986.
[102] Sub-committee on Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees, 'Agreed Report on the Third Phase of Resettlement Programme for Vietnamese Refugees' (circa, 1980), p. 3.

was, in many ways, symptomatic of what the Policy Advisory Committee report of

1987 described as 'compassion fatigue'.[103] As the resettlement stages had been co-

ordinated through *ad hoc* committees and funded largely through charitable

donations, language training was perhaps the most obvious casualty of widespread

erosion in interest and support. However, McGovern makes a trenchant claim that

the State's avoidance of responsibility in the early years of resettlement was

contrary to European best practice. She drew attention to the *EEC Directive on the*

*Education of Children of Migrant Workers* in her research.[104] The spirit of this

directive placed responsibility on the shoulders of member states for the free

education of children of migrant workers in the host language(s), mother tongue,

native culture, and for the training of special teachers in this area. A subsequent

directive in 1987 widened the scope of the original one to include all children of

ethnic minorities. According to McGovern, by the mid 1980s, 'there were no

reception programmes in the English language for Vietnamese children of

compulsory schooling age.... Instead, these children were not only expected to

pick up English but also to learn the Irish language'.[105] Put in context, this

situation underscores the difficulties in comparative analysis with other European

countries while at the same time highlighting the anomalies in the Irish example.

Children with barely a few words of English were being put in classrooms with no

special provision and asked to sink or swim. They would have to acquire another

language by osmosis and along the way some were expected to pick up a few

words *as Gaeilge.*

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[103] Refugee Resettlement Committee, 'Report on Refugee Resettlement for 1987' (unpublished report, 1987), paragraph 2.1.
[104] Commission of the European Communities, *Council Directive on the Education of Children of Migrant Workers* (Brussels: European Commission, 77/486/EEC 25 July 1977).

**Figure 6: 'Vietnamese-Irish Homes, 1980s'**
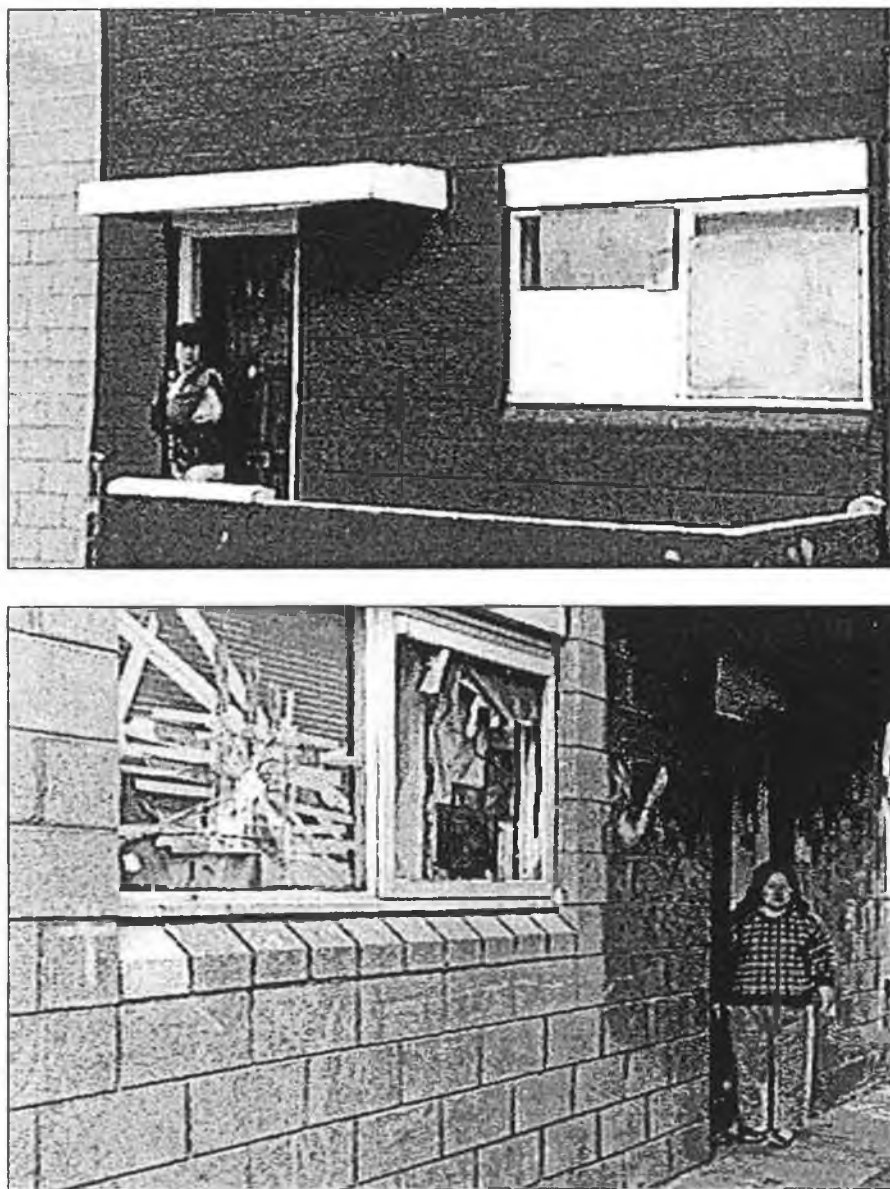


(Courtesy of Kyros Communications Documentary, *Refugees: the Irish Experience,* 1992.)

In hindsight it was never likely that such directives would be followed to the letter in Ireland in the 1980s. But European governance was unforgiving. In 1989 the European Commission reported on the implementation of the 1977 directive and reprimanded the Irish Government. However, one project did operate. During the

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[105] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 135.

1982-83 academic years that the Dun Laoghaire Pilot Teaching Project was set up

through the Vocational Education Committee (VEC)—in the beginning it only

catered for 10 men and 4 women in that specific area. The project ran on a budget

of £5,600 per annum, which represented 800 contact hours. Four teachers gave

instruction in the homes of students. In 1983 the late Miriam Dean, a teacher on

the Project and passionate advocate for the Vietnamese-Irish, sketched out the

following picture:

> For the ethnic Chinese, especially from South Vietnam, education has been
> a rather haphazard experience. Accustomed to their own Chinese schools,
> many lost opportunities for education when, in 1975 the communists closed
> these schools. Some from both ethnic groups came from the rural areas,
> where educational opportunities were limited, and all except the elderly
> have, in some form or another, followed their studies under the shadow of
> armed conflict. The majority speak both Vietnamese and a Chinese dialect
> and some are literate in one or another of these languages or both. A few
> speak only one of these languages whilst some are not literate in either....
> Some of the older members of the group have a slight knowledge of French
> while some of the younger members have acquired a modicum of English,
> usually the American version.[106]

During 1985-86 there were 34 students of mixed ability in the pilot project

scheme. The project, however, was suffering under internal and external pressures.

Internally, it was becoming difficult to sustain due to the work commitments of the

students. Families were involved in takeaway businesses, which normally required

work from 2pm until 2am or much later and family employees would then sleep

until midday. The language teachers made heroic efforts to keep the Project going

despite such pressures. External demands included incredibly poor provision in

accommodation and services (some classes were delivered out of mobile homes).

The Project staggered along despite cutbacks in the year 1987 to 1988. In the

following 12 months 117 new Vietnamese refugees arrived in Ireland as part of the Family Reunification Scheme. This provided the impetus for a more structured and better-funded scheme. A new language programme was established with a delivery of 2,400 teaching hours. For some this was too little too late. According to one Vietnamese-Irish woman interviewed by Frieda McGovern:

> We were all told when we came here that we would have to learn English, change our customs ... in order to get on. Well some of us have learnt English and have changed our customs, and nothing much has happened to us. All my brothers who have left School ... are on the dole.[107]

In 1993 Michael Pelly S.J. published 'Boat People in Ireland', which reviewed the language training process from a cultural perspective as well as from a personal one. He pointed to the expected issues of language difference and translation, mentioning with ecclesiastical irony that Vietnamese pupils couldn't pronounce 'sin'. Pelly argued that training in 'survival English' was often difficult and classes were often held in students' homes. His work also provides an insight into the close relationship that had emerged between NGO workers and language teachers and the former refugees and their families, as the following vignette illustrates:

> We [*language teachers*] rejoiced when two married sisters were properly housed next door to each other. But they were hardly settled when a take-away business began at each front door – to our amazement and the wonder of the neighbours. We had misgivings and counselled as best we could. While marvelling at their ingenuity and determination to achieve economic independence, we felt afraid for them. And rightly. They visibly wilted under a campaign of break-ins, stealing and sheer vandalism, not to mention slanderous complaints against them lodged at the town hall.[108]

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[106] Miriam Dean, 'Language Across Cultures' in *Proceedings of a Symposium held in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, 8-9 July 1983* (Dublin: Irish Association for Applied Linguistics), p. 74.
[107] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 168.
[108] Michael Pelly, 'Boat People in Ireland' in Adrian Lyons (ed.) *Voices, Stories, Hopes: Cambodia and Vietnam: Refugees and Volunteers* (Victoria, Australia: Collins Dove, 1993), p. 125.

In the final analysis, the provision of English language classes for the Vietnamese programme refugees suffered from poor resources and chronic delays. By the late 1990s, according to a report written by Cathal O'Regan, only 50% of Vietnamese-Irish judged themselves to have functional English language abilities. O'Regan's report indicated that the majority of Vietnamese in employment were those who had reasonable language proficiency, or those, such as in the takeaway business, who relied on English by proxy, i.e. those who work closely with English-speaking friends or relatives. Many more would have been employed if their language abilities had been better. In consequence, for the sake of short-term inaction, long-term dependency on State benefit has been incurred.

For the children of Vietnamese refugees and for those that came as unaccompanied minors the Irish education system proved to be a harsh one. Though many children have gone on to university, a substantial number of children have become casualties to family pressures, poorly funded schools and, in a small number of cases, racially motivated bullying. However, the greatest obstacle is not racial violence or a lack of special education resources but, rather, a lack of adequate understanding of the issues involved, translating into a lack of planning. In 1981 over 60 Vietnamese children were of compulsory school age, 39 boys and 23 girls, ranging in age from 5 to 15 years. According to the Refugee Resettlement Committee's annual report for 1986,

> ... the problems increase in ratio with the children's ages. Many of the children are in classes two years below that which they should be. ... Some excel at subjects like mathematics and art but struggle at subjects with higher language content.[109]

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[109] Refugee Resettlement Committee, 'Report on Refugee Resettlement for 1986' (unpublished report, 1987), paragraph 2.2.

In the absence of additional language support children were held back, placed in lower years or allowed to gain access to general remedial classes. Frieda McGovern has described this as a sink or swim policy.[110] She carried out research in four secondary schools in the areas of Dublin that Vietnamese refugees were residing in at the time. Her conclusions make for grim reading:

> There were only 9 Vietnamese pupils in the four second-level schools in the academic year 1989-90. Of the remaining 18 Vietnamese pupils between the ages of 12-18 in the study areas in 1989, 1 was in another secondary school, approximately 5 were in primary schools, and the rest had left the mainstream system, the vast majority of these without qualifications ...[111]

To be clear, McGovern was reporting instances where pupils arrived in classrooms without a word of English and there they sat in silence—the social equivalent of catatonia. Her research provides an interesting case study of a secondary school for boys where three pupils were on the verge of gaining access to additional language tuition through the remedial system. According to McGovern, this conflicted with the policy of being thrown in 'at the deep end' emanating from the Refugee Resettlement Committee.[112] The children were subsequently removed to a primary school.

The relationships between the Vietnamese pupils and their peers was also mixed. In McGovern's research most school representatives she interviewed suggested that the Vietnamese pupils mixed well. In some instances, however, teachers hinted at racial marginalisation outside of the school. In my own work, I have heard of a number of cases of racially motivated bullying. In one instance, a

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[110] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 196.
[111] *Ibid.,* p. 205.
[112] *Ibid.*

gang was bullying a young girl at school. She did not inform her parents or her head teacher and when the latter discovered bruises on her arms domestic violence was suspected to be the cause. The child had to translate during a meeting between the parents and the head teacher, and the confusion led to social services being contacted and the girl being taken into care until interviews and appropriate translating revealed the actual issues at stake. Having been asked to stand as a temporary guardian to the girl (though that became unnecessary in this instance) it quickly became obvious to me that both the parents and the school authorities were being rendered helpless and frustrated by an inability to act on this issue despite their best efforts to help the victim.

McGovern also suggested that the teachers' positive reaction to the pupils could well have been the result of yet more stereotypes. She noted that the descriptions of the students as 'polite', 'neat', and 'quiet and well behaved' conform to the image of Vietnamese pupils in many Western countries. She argued that this was due to the high regard for education prevalent in their families, which resulted in them making few demands on teachers' time. When asked what the future might hold for them one teacher said:

> Not good for this generation. The pressure of society is such that they keep to themselves … they are harassed outside the school, because they are hardworking and are viewed as managing to make a go of their take away vans … there is jealousy in the community … which makes life very difficult for the families.[113]

If the education system, economy and urban fabric was letting down former Vietnamese refugees and their families in the Ireland of the 1980s then they were

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[113] *Ibid.,* p. 211.

surely not alone. And the greatest research difficulty is separating their plight from the more general struggles of poorer Dublin neighbourhoods in that decade.

**Framing the Challenges**

The resettlement of former Vietnamese refugees presented a number of challenges to all governments that responded to the Southeast Asian Crisis of the late 1970s. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France bore much of the responsibility for the resettlement of refugees and much of the responsibility for creating the conditions for the crisis in the first place. For smaller countries, from Iceland to Ireland, the initial humanitarian response led to a range of difficulties in getting to grips with what seemed to be an exceptional situation. The machinery of government is now expected, and often required, to respond by altering core values in the face of the challenge posed by ethnic minorities. In the 1970s and early 1980s in Ireland, the challenge posed by the resettlement of Vietnamese programme refugees appeared to be anomalous: the numbers had been kept small, and the people themselves did not cause 'trouble'— the challenge had simply been postponed.

While the overall resettlement policy may be critically evaluated as weak and at times limited, one must be careful not to erase the intimate history of what is disguised under the term 'resettlement'. In the midlands of Ireland, on the outskirts of a large town is an equally large graveyard. There on the headstone of a woman who died prematurely form cancer is a small inscription telling those who stop to read it that this woman is remembered fondly by a Vietnamese-Irish family. She nursed their sick children and took them to hospital when necessary; she fought with bureaucrats to get permits for their fledging takeaway businesses; and

every Friday night they would leave so much takeaway food at her door that she had to get the neighbours to help her eat it. For years the Vietnamese-Irish family communicated with her through gestures, good will and a kind of *Esperanto*, yet friendship of a deep kind grew. She did all of this as a volunteer. This is also what was meant by the word resettlement—the making of a new home.

A more intimate ethnography involves thinking about the meaning and significance of events for the people concerned. In the final analysis, the close relationship built up over years between refugees invited to a strange country and those people who did everything possible—and a lot that scarcely seems possible—to welcome them may be far more meaningful and significant that any government-level policy. The challenge from here, however, is to look more closely at the contemporary situation. One must also begin to ask how can this initial perspective throw light on the contemporary world of first and second-generation Vietnamese-Irish and ask how can this illumination be brought about through the words and ideas of the people themselves?

## Chapter 2: Imagining the Past and Remembering the Future

When a Vietnamese-Irish man died following a vicious attack on the streets of Dublin in 2002 shockwaves ran through this tiny ethnic minority. Soon after the incident was reported in the media, I spent a day in the Vietnamese-Irish Association's buildings and spoke to several people who knew him. They expressed their disbelief and sadness at the event and said that their thoughts were with his family, but they appeared on the surface to have little to say about any broader implications. Yet, among those who I knew well, a mantra-like phrase circulated throughout the day: 'The country that gave him his freedom took his life.' Perhaps a journalist wrote it, or someone overheard it on the radio—it had the air of a good sound bite—but, whatever the origins of the phrase, it did seem to form into words the prevailing state of mind, which was characterised more by disillusionment than by anything else. The more I reflected on this often-repeated phrase the more I came to realise that it condensed a story of sorts: life had been a struggle both in Vietnam and in Ireland and just when things seemed to be getting better a disaster, which could have befallen anyone, had taken a respected man.

Ethnography involves not just describing people's lives and the details of their actions, one must also suggest the meaning of their actions and the significance that they assign to the various aspects of their lives. When trying to get to grips with a statement about loss, freedom and disillusionment amongst Vietnamese-Irish people one needs to array a whole set of intellectual tools, drawn from the close study of history, identity and memory, to name but a few key resources. So far I have outlined responses to the reception and the resettlement of Vietnamese programme refugees from a variety of positions, including those of the

State, NGOs and the media. While charting such responses an idea of what the first years in Ireland were like for Vietnamese refugees was also suggested. The perspective for this description did not allow for a full understanding of the significance of events, however. In order to further this goal a detailed portrait of the contemporary situation for Vietnamese-Irish people must be set out. I will take this as a starting point from which to begin to consider the cultural patterns of the past 25 years in Ireland through the eyes and in the words of the people themselves.

**Contemporary Patterns**

When thinking about ethnic minorities, journalists, public figures and social scientists often assign coherence to a population, which the people themselves would be hard-pressed to recognise. In contemporary Dublin it has become common to hear about various ethnic 'communities', the Travelling Community and even the 'settled' community. Social scientists often uncritically use the language of community in a manner that is suggestive of a population with similar values and, perhaps, a shared history, that is hard-shelled against the world. Despite the fact that the fixity and essentialism of the notion of community stands up to little scrutiny, the use of the term as a kind of keyword, to borrow again from Raymond Williams, is increasingly fashionable.[114] At a point in history when there are numerous complaints that modern life has swept the values of community away there has, interestingly, been an explosion in the use of the term community for local governance (where once the welfare state reigned), for development (where no other word seems appropriate, as in the case of the rather heterogeneous so-called Travelling Community), or as an analytical dustbin for the odds and ends of

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[114] Raymond Williams, *Keywords,* p. 22.

knowledge about people we simply don't know much about. The problems of history, space, knowledge and power that are in the very conditions for the use of the community category are acute when it comes to ethnic minorities. All too often minorities are expected to be cognitively reassuring, i.e. be a community, exist in one location and have 'leaders' that speak English, sit on committees and give press interviews should diversity be required in public debate.

There is a danger, therefore, in using the word community as a substitute for recognising the complexities and dynamics of people's lives. The same danger extends to some of the ways in which the word culture is employed. Ethnic minorities, in particular, are often seen as culturally distinct and as homogenous, thus allowing modes of analysis that privilege coherence to be uncritically employed. But people's lives all to often elude systematic explanations and predictive models. Clifford Geertz noted this in *The Interpretation of Cultures* when he remarked, 'there is nothing so coherent as a paranoid's delusion or a swindler's story'.[115] One needs, therefore, to constantly remember the raw flux of social and cultural realities and the contingent style of the forms those realities take. Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed this as one of the great challenges to social thinking when he suggested that one should see 'life as a weave, this pattern is not always complete and is varied in a multiplicity of ways. ... And one pattern in the weave is interwoven with many others.'[116] Despite the danger highlighted by Geertz and the challenge set out by Wittgenstein, when it comes to migration research populations are often imagined in a unified way. But this scientific imagination is of a very different cast. In order to say something about the history

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[115] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 18.

of Irish-America, for example, one's first step is to trace migration from a place called Ireland, and this is made difficult when one moves towards considering how the border might feature or whether North America or the USA and Canada are the appropriate units of analysis. While a certain kind of solidity might appear to exist in ethnic or community categories in migration research, this unity is contingent on the research questions being asked. The questions asked relate to movements across nation-states or regions and transformations across generations; identity is something considered as it reflects a given population that has migrated or are migrating.

Thus far I have used the label Vietnamese-Irish to think about those from both ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese backgrounds. While the label I use is contingent so too are the two ethnicities that one might 'discover' on the ground: Chinese-Vietnamese ethnicity is problematic at best and so also is Vietnamese ethnicity—indeed, both are cross cut by historical differences and differences in social status and religion. While the numbers of former programme refugees from Vietnam in Ireland are small this does not imply that they are a homogenous group. I have met or know of people who lay claim to identities that range from ethnic Thai, to Cao Dai (a religious/military sect) and Montagnard (a French term for tribal peoples). As with all ethnographic projects, certain individuals and families were more accessible than others. I spoke to more ethnic Vietnamese people than Chinese-Vietnamese people. Yet such identity classifications are not that rigid—status, prosperity and creativity are just as important. I once asked a Vietnamese-Irish man, who described himself as 'ethnic Vietnamese', whether he knew any Chinese-Vietnamese people in Ireland. 'Yes',

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[116] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, translated by G Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell,

he replied, 'my wife.' Thus, I will consider a Vietnamese-Irish identity for the purposes of studying migration and for tracing broad trends, and I will examine this identity more closely later.

It is also important to briefly make some terminological distinctions. The Vietnamese refugees who were admitted to Ireland are programme refugees, which means that they were invited to Ireland on foot of a Government Decision. Such decisions are made in response to humanitarian requests from international bodies like the United Nations. Those invited to Ireland are conventionally categorised as primary admissions, i.e. those admitted into Ireland under initial government decisions, or secondary admissions, i.e. family members who arrived under the Family Reunification Scheme.[117] Under the Family Reunification Scheme, spouses of Vietnamese refugees have an automatic entitlement to come to Ireland to join their family, 'in recognition of the difficulties faced by such a small community in finding potential marriage partners from within their own ethnic group in Ireland'.[118] Such secondary admissions were facilitated in order of priority: (a) widowed daughters or sisters in Vietnam or in a refugee camp, and their unmarried children; (b) families (parents, unmarried children and unmarried siblings) remaining in Vietnam or in a refugee camp; and, (c) other cases of exceptional hardship whose sole family links are with refugees who have been resettled in

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1967), pp. 567-569.

[117] This distinguishes programme refugees from 'refugees' in the sense that popular consciousness has it: we can discuss 'Programme Refugees'; 'Convention Refugees', who fulfil the requirement of the definition of a refugee under the 1951 Geneva Convention; those who have 'Leave to Remain', which is granted at the discretion of the Minister for Justice to a person who does not fully meet the requirements of the definition of a refugee under the 1951 Geneva Convention, but who the Minister decides should be allowed to remain in the State for humanitarian reasons; and, finally, 'Asylum Seekers', who seek recognition as refugees.

[118] Cathal O'Regan, *Report of a Survey of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities*, p. 7, and Refugee Agency, 'Information Bulletin' (Dublin: Refugee Agency, 1993).

Ireland.   In the 1998 *Annual Report of the Refugee Agency* the following age

profile obtained:

**Figure 7: 'Vietnamese Community by Age and Sex, 31 December 1998'**

|        | 0-18 Years | 19-30 Years | 31-40 Years | 41-50 Years | 51-60 Years | 61-65 Years | 66+ Years | Total |
|--------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-------|
| Male   | 109        | 101         | 36          | 17          | 18          | 8           | 9         | 298   |
| Female | 121        | 74          | 41          | 30          | 27          | 3           | 22        | 318   |
| Total  | 230        | 175         | 77          | 47          | 45          | 11          | 31        | 616   |

(Source: *Refugee Agency Annual Report, 1998, p. 15*)

At this point 166 members of the community were born in Ireland.  We may also

see that this is a reasonably young population.  A further and more complete report

was provided by the same Agency in 1999-2000:

**Figure 8: 'Basic Demographics'**

| Year | New Intake | Family Re-unification | Birth | Death | Departures | Total Depart | Total |
|------|-----------|-----------------------|-------|-------|------------|--------------|-------|
| 1979 | 212 |    | 1  |   | 4 to UK | 4 | 209 |
| 1980 |     |    | 16 | 1 | 4 to UK | 4 | 220 |
| 1981 |     | 36 | 7  | 2 |         |   | 261 |
| 1982 |     | 20 | 12 |   | 3 to France | 3 | 290 |
| 1983 |     | 12 | 13 |   | 6 Australia; 1 Canada | 7 | 308 |
| 1984 |     | 8  | 10 | 1 | 1 Vietnam | 1 | 324 |
| 1985 |     | 7  | 10 | 2 | 3 Canada; 1 UK | 4 | 335 |
| 1986 |     | 4  | 12 | 2 | 9 UK; 1 USA | 10 | 339 |
| 1987 |     | 3  | 8  | 2 | 32 UK; 1 USA | 33 | 315 |
| 1988 |     | 58 | 10 | 2 | 11 UK; 1 USA; 1 Canada | 13 | 368 |
| 1989 |     | 47 | 9  | 2 | 12 UK; 5 Can; 2 USA | 19 | 403 |
| 1990 |     | 19 | 9  | 3 | 1 to USA | 1 | 427 |
| 1991 |     | 15 | 9  | 3 | 8 to UK | 8 | 440 |
| 1992 |     | 10 | 10 |   | 6 UK; 1 USA; 1 Ger.; 1 China; 1 Austria | 8 | 450 |
| 1993 |     | 38 | 15 | 2 | 1 to Denmark | 2 | 500 |
| 1994 |     | 32 | 11 | 2 | 10 to UK; 4 to USA; 1 Canada | 1 | 526 |
| 1995 |     | 30 | 12 | 1 | 4 USA; 2 UK | 15 | 561 |
| 1996 |     | 18 | 10 | 4 | 7 to USA; 1 to France | 6 | 577 |
| 1997 |     | 21 | 8  | 2 |         | 8 | 604 |
| 1998 |     | 4  | 8  |   |         |   | 616 |
| 1999 |     | 180 |   | 1 |         |   | 795 |
| 2000 |     | 29 |    | 1 |         |   | 823 |

(Source: *Refugee Agency Annual Report, 1999-2000*)

There are a number of reasonable judgements that may be made about the above data. Firstly, at this point, we may note that the bulk of the population, 591 persons, arrived through the Family Reunification Scheme. The rounded average number of secondary admissions from 1979 to 2000 was 27 persons per annum. One may assume that this figure will decrease over the next few years, as the number of potential candidates eligible to travel to Ireland under the Family Reunification Scheme is more likely to diminish than to grow. Also, the justification for the Scheme (availability of marriage partners in a small population) has been influenced by the increasing openness of Vietnam in recent years and greater frequency of travel between Vietnam and Ireland. However, humanitarian grounds will inevitably see some calls to facilitate family members to resettle in Ireland being answered.

The average birth rate per year between 1979 and 2000 was 9 per annum. One may assume that this will remain steady until the second generation, many of whom are now outside the radar, begin to produce a third generation, giving rise to a multiplier effect. The consequences of this are difficult to predict now. Average mortality rate stands at 1.5 per annum between 1979 and 2000. As the 'Vietnamese Persons by Age and Sex, 31 December 1998' table, above, indicates a fairly young population, one could conclude that this rate will maintain its current levels for several years to come. Overall then, a reasonable estimate would suggest that this year there are at least 961 persons in Ireland who can claim to be Vietnamese-Irish. If we assume that our estimates of the birth rate are probably low rather than high (due to enumeration difficulties), and if we think about the

emergent third generation, then a less conservative estimate would put the population well over the 1000 mark.

An interesting set of data relates to emigration of Vietnamese-Irish people. Of those who emigrated, a rounded average of 7 per annum from 1979 to 2000, clear choices were made in terms of destination, as the following chart illustrates:

**Figure 9: 'Vietnamese-Irish Emigration by Destination, 1979-2000'**
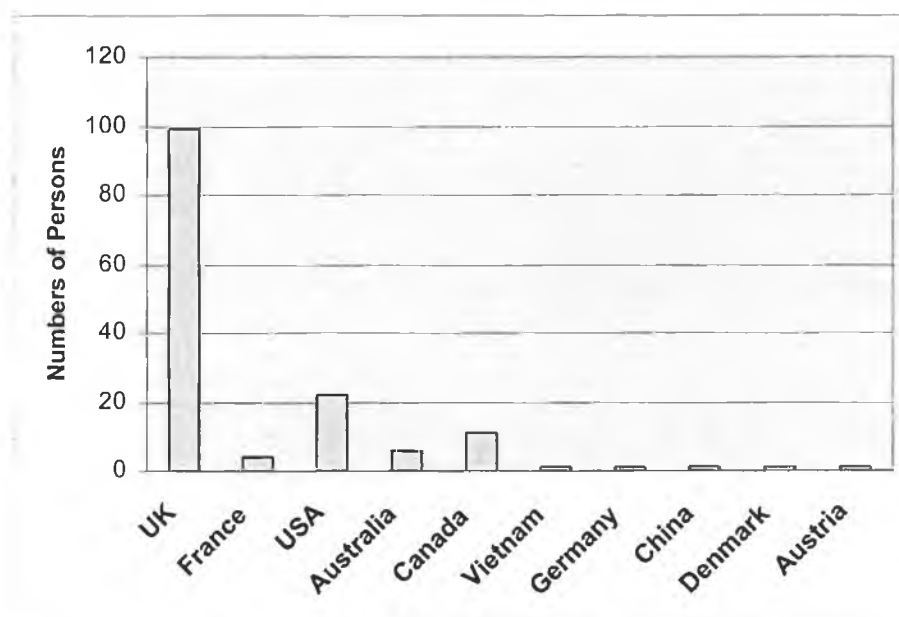


(Source of data: *Refugee Agency Annual Report, 1999-2000*)

Such clear choices are unsurprising considering that the most favoured destination countries are those with high *Viet Kieu* (or overseas Vietnamese) populations. And, the UK ranks highest due to its large Vietnamese-British population, its opportunities for work and its proximity to Ireland. Just over 67% of all Vietnamese-Irish emigrants travelled to the United Kingdom. However, we do not know if they all remained within the UK. It is also noteworthy that emigration has ceased according to the Refugee Agency's (now the Reception and Integration Agency) figures, giving us the following clear migration pattern over a two-decade period.

**Figure 10: 'Vietnamese-Irish Emigrants Per Annum, 1979-2000'**
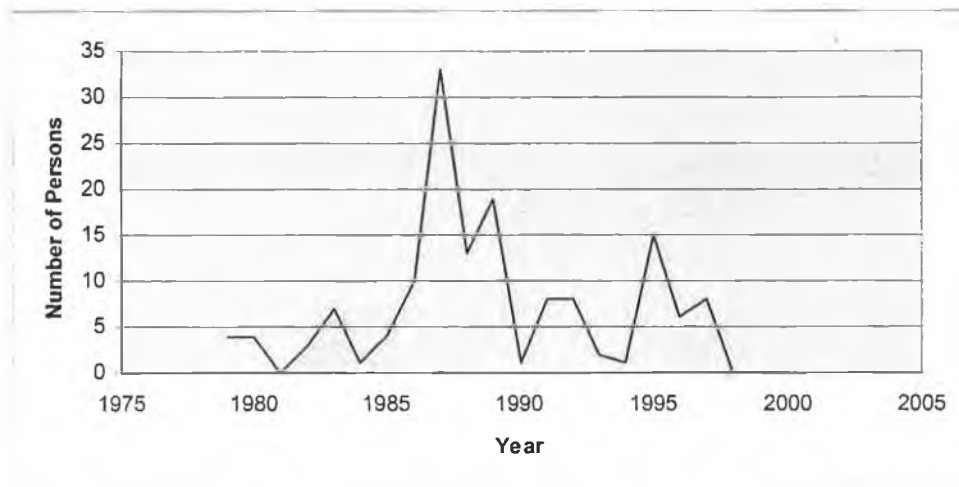


(Source of data: *Refugee Agency Annual Report, 1999-2000*)

Emigration here is predominantly to the United Kingdom in the mid 1980s, reaching a height of 33 persons in 1987, or a rounded figure 10% of the previous year's Vietnamese-Irish population, and this pattern seems to have shifted towards little or no emigration in recent years. Does this suggest that for the high figure of one in ten Vietnamese-Irish people Ireland was not a place to live in the mid 1980s? We may not dismiss the question by suggesting that emigration was high in Ireland anyway and that the areas of Dublin in which the Vietnamese-Irish resided were particularly marked by high unemployment and disadvantage—the two do not logically follow, because migration is not necessarily a poor person's game. One must be wary also of positing a straightforward narrative of increasing wealth and rootedness. Over the past two years, I have encountered five second-generation persons planning to emigrate, three who have just returned from Australia, and one who plans to relocate to the United States.

My own work has suggested that most of those who emigrated since 1994 departed in entire family groups and that these family groups were invariably small by comparison to the large extended families that characterise the Vietnamese-Irish

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population. Emigration did not necessarily provide the solutions that individuals and families had hoped for either. Vietnamese-Irish people who have kept in contact with those who emigrated have suggested that cities such as London and Birmingham proved to be harsh environments for many. Even in the late 1980s many Vietnamese-Irish people had strong contacts with NGOs and former resettlement workers; in the UK, for example, few such supports existed. Doubtless many prospered in the UK and in the USA or Canada, but for a small portion of this ethnic Irish diaspora standards of housing and lifestyle did decline.

**Refining the Profile**

In the late 1990s the Refugee Research Project emerged as a collaborative initiative between the Department of Psychology, Eastern Regional Health Board and the Refugee Agency in Ireland. The Project was funded and/or supported by five government departments and employed a core staff of five persons between 1996 and 1998. This undertaking, to trace out a sociological picture of two major refugee populations—the Vietnamese and Bosnian programme refugees and their families—was the first of its kind in Ireland. In 1998 Cathal O'Regan published the results of the research project.[119] The uniqueness of what was done and the professional manner in which it was carried out make it important for my purposes here. The data produced may be used with regard to my own work to balance, test and to confirm patterns.

I will not discuss the dimensions of the Project that dealt with the Bosnian 'community' and will confine myself, instead, to the data arising from the Vietnamese sample. The research involved an initial sample of 50 persons, equally

balanced between genders, which later had to be augmented by the addition of a further 20 persons to the sample pool due to poor participation rates. O'Regan noted that it was considered odd that research on resettlement was taking place over 15 years after the actual resettlement.[120] Along with research into each person's background, experiences of escape, resettlement; future plans, etc. the Project also employed a General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) to gauge psychological distress and teachers' assessments of a sample of 20 Vietnamese students. In terms of housing, the report noted (n = 29) that 3.45% of respondents indicated that they rented from a relative, 20.69% rented from a private landlord, 55.17% rented from a local authority, 13.79% were 'buying with a mortgage', and 3.45% owned their homes outright. The residential pattern was a clear one:

**Figure 11: 'Vietnamese by Residential Addresses, 1998'**
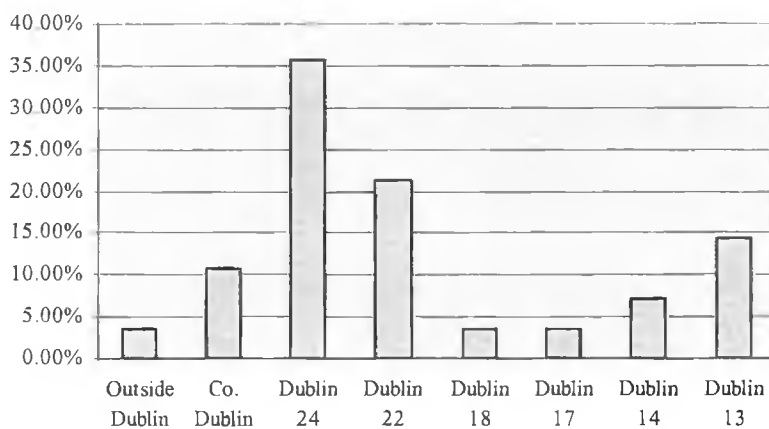


(Data source: Cathal O'Regan, *Report of a Survey of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities in Ireland*, p. 53.)

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[119] Cathal O'Regan, *Report of a Survey of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities in Ireland*.
[120] Final participation levels were low, though still respectable, at 29 persons, provoking O'Regan to note that a longer and more intensive fieldwork process would have been desirable in hindsight. I will confine myself to dealing with the more substantial questions and not draw conclusions from cases where less than 10 respondents answered a particular question.

One should also note the fact that 48% of Vietnamese respondents (n = 27)

expressed a desire to move again some time in the future. Later, I will look more

closely at residence patterns.

Amongst the sample (n = 29), self-descriptions of main day-to-day

activities generated a number of research problems, such as discrepancies (likely

due to confusion) between benefit payments and numbers indicating in responses

that they were unemployed. Nonetheless a fairly clear profile may be discerned:

**Figure 12: 'Self-descriptions of Main Day-to-day Activities'**
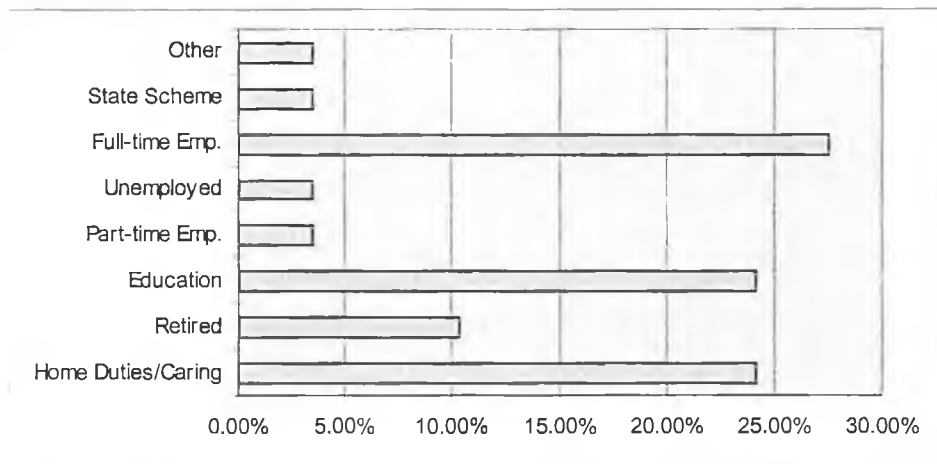


(Data source: Cathal O'Regan, *Report of a Survey of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities in Ireland,* p. 61.)

It is difficult at this juncture to pursue issues of socio-economic status or to probe

deeper into how easily households can provide for their members. Several

discrepancies in responses were highlighted by the *Report of a Survey of*

*Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities in Ireland*, and my own research

has strongly suggested that self-presentation by Vietnamese-Irish persons includes

a reluctance to discuss 'family' and business matters with outsiders.

In terms of English language skills, the table below (n = 27) indicates a

worrying picture, particularly with regard to the numbers who seem never to have

availed of English language training or who may not have been in a position, for

what ever reason, to engage in such training.  However, further investigation of this important issue was beyond the scope of the Research Project:

**Figure 13: 'Length of Time Spent in English Language Training'**
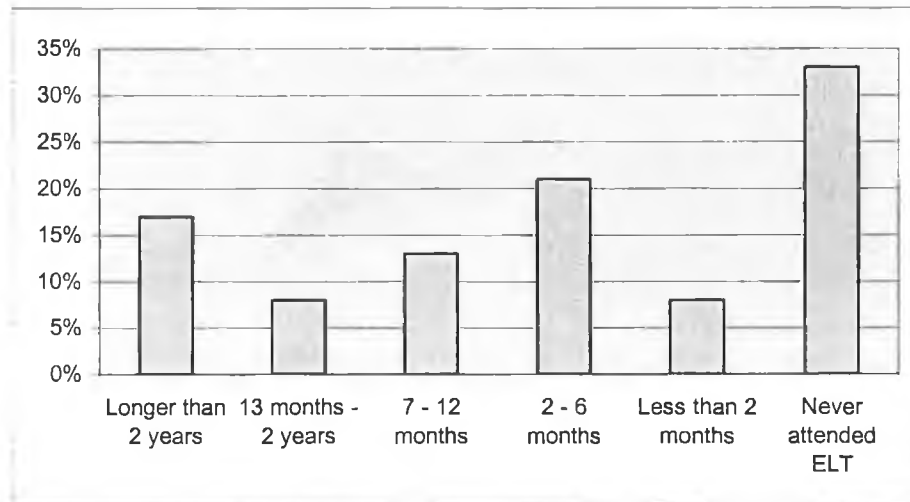


(Data source: Cathal O'Regan, *Report of a Survey of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities in Ireland,* p. 75)

There is a substantial international literature that posits a strong link between host society language ability and levels of 'integration'.  O'Regan's report indicated low participation in organised religion and low attendance of social/entertainment events; yet, feelings of belonging to the 'community' were relatively high, particularly amongst those with better English language skills, and those who had been in Ireland the longest and who planned their futures here.  But, one could ask: how much stock can we put in feelings of belonging, except perhaps as an indicator of well being, when it does not translate into activity?

**Spatial Location**

In the course of this research I had the opportunity to build up a database on 527 individuals across 99 household units.  These households represent, in many cases, the homes of one chapter of a large family network.  Much of the basic data

on ethnicity, residential addresses or occupations, etc. was worked up from Vietnamese-Irish Association lists by confirming the accuracy with senior Vietnamese-Irish persons. The data arising from Cathal O'Regan's work differs little in substance from what I have found. My purpose in gathering the data was to progress towards looking in closer detail at the people concerned. There are some broad issues that first need to be expanded though, such as spatial patterns, livelihood and general family organisation.

We already have an image of spatial location that was derived from O'Regan's work, and we may recall that a secondary migration occurred after initial dispersal in the early 1980s; yet, we need to discuss the reasons for this secondary migration and the reasons for contemporary concentrations before we can discuss family structures and household composition. As noted in the chapter above, a Conference of Major Religious Superiors Meeting of 24 June 1980 gives us this insight into the spatial locations of Vietnamese-Irish people in that year. While many families were housed in Dublin, many more were accommodated in places such as Tuam, Middleton, Tralee or Sligo.[121] Vietnamese former refugees recall a certain solidarity having emerged in the reception centres that was shattered upon being moved. For those who were relocated outside of Dublin, a law of increasing dislocation seems to have obtained, where the further from the Dublin or fellow Vietnamese persons they were the more intense the desire to migrate back became. The following is a translated and edited transcript of an interview with a now elderly Vietnamese-Irish woman:[122]

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[121] Conference of Major Religious Superiors Meeting (unpublished, IECE archives, 24 June 1980), p. 2.
[122] The name of the town she was dispersed to has been omitted to protect her anonymity.

I was in Swords, then Blanchardstown then [*West-of-Ireland town*]. When I was sent to there, a nun looked after me, but I couldn't find anything to do there. Every week the nun would walk into the house and look in the fridge. She would make a note of what I needed and buy it for me. After a while we could communicate with difficulty, and sometimes I would go out with her and she could translate. I remember only two families in [...]. We decided to go back to Dublin before 1982. We moved to be closer to other families and more work. I worked picking food—mushrooms. My oldest child was 16 and she had to leave school to help me with work. A little after that, my sister followed us up, and then we could afford to put the children in school and work.

A Vietnamese-Irish man in his thirties spoke to me at length about his experiences 'down the country' in the 1980s. Like everyone I discussed such matters with he prefaced everything he had to say with thanks to 'the Irish' for treating him so well and giving him opportunities. However, 'When I was a child', he noted,

there were no other Asian children in the school and I thought I was the only one in the country! I spoke no English and would sit in class with the teacher saying things I couldn't understand. When I got homework, I had to take out the dictionary to understand the questions.

He further recalled, in a pained way, that 'every break, when the kids went out to the playground they would all gather around me, hundreds, in a circle and eat their lunch watching me—I was an alien to them!'

For others, usually where there was a large family to support each other, the experience was a positive one. Some of those I questioned had an almost militaristic memory of their time in the West and South West of Ireland, describing it as a temporary hiatus and as an opportunity to get to know their new country and make plans. One individual was invited to move to a midlands town but maintained one foot in Dublin and recalled this fairly detailed description:

I studied English in Swords. I just learned. First, I only knew 'yes', 'no' and 'ok'. When people would ask me things, and I didn't understand, I would answer, 'yes'. And some times I didn't understand and I would say, 'no'. Anything at all: 'yes', 'no', 'ok', that's all the English I had. My family came over in 1981, my wife, my children, my brother and my sister.

We got a place then in a convent for a few months. This was in Dublin, here. After that we went to down the country. I was told that some people had a community over there to sponsor my family. I said ok, and I started to train with ANCO. Around that time we didn't know anything. Whatever the government said, we said ok. I was still happy there because the community were very nice. They got a job for my brother, and the children went to school there. I was still with ANCO, and I went up and down every day, from [*the midlands*] to Dublin. I had a bicycle ... with an engine. I go up in the morning and come back in the evening. Sometimes in the cold weather, my hands were very cold and I couldn't get them off the handlebars.

There were 17, I think, 17 or 18 people with us in that town. There was a problem with the language: some people went to the West, but the people could not talk to them. After a while there the people couldn't get a job, you know, they were lonely and after a while some of our people started on the caravans ... on the mobile food vans. In Dublin at that time there were people working the mobile vans. I was one of the first to move to Dublin.

Such memories bring into sharp focus the meaning of secondary migration for those concerned. But one should not overly particularise such experiences as something that happened in Ireland and nowhere else. Vaughan Robinson and Samantha Hale have discussed the not dissimilar secondary migration that occurred in the United Kingdom in the 1980s.[123] In Great Britain it was NGOs such as Ockenden Venture, Save the Children Fund and the British Council for Aid to Refugees that carried out much of the resettlement work. Also, the goal of resettlement was to facilitate the refugees to 'enter into mainstream British life as quickly as possible', and a central strategy in achieving this goal was 'dispersal to communities'.[124]

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[123] Their analysis is based on a Home Office Survey of 6500 Vietnamese, a small household survey in 1983 and the authors' database of 11,289 individuals who were living in United Kingdom in 1981. See Vaughan Robinson and Samantha Hale, 'The Geography of Vietnamese Secondary Migration in the UK,' *Research Paper in Ethnic Relations,* no. 10, (Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick and Department of Geography, University College, Swansea, 1989).
[124] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The cluster of ideas and terms used at the time—avoiding ghettoisation, spreading the social costs, and speeding up assimilation—were of the same family as those used in Ireland. There was also a similar gap between policy aspirations and the *ad hoc* situation on the ground: NGOs organised much of the resettlement not on the basis of what made long-term sense for the people concerned but, rather, on the basis of availability of volunteers, housing and funds. Of course, there are many features of the UK experience that differed from Ireland, including relations with existing ethnic minorities and numbers involved, for example. Yet the similarity is striking. According to Robinson and Hale, 'barely three years after dispersal had been introduced as a policy objective, those involved in the programme were questioning the wisdom of the decision'.[125] A Home Affairs Select Committee Report had this to say: 'The policy of dispersal is now almost universally regarded as mistaken. ... It is hard to think of any problem facing the Vietnamese, which would not have been less severe or difficult to resolve if the disastrous policy of dispersal had not been adopted.'[126] Over half of all the Vietnamese refugees resettled in the United Kingdom changed their address after resettlement, and many moved to London and large urban centres such as Birmingham.

I have already borrowed from O'Regan's work to indicate the spatial distribution of the Vietnamese-Irish population. I will expand on that representation briefly. The table below and subsequent map (for illustrative purposes only) is drawn from a database containing information on 527 individuals. I have excluded those who I understood to have emigrated or died.

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[125] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[126] *Ibid.,* p. 10.

**Figure 14: 'Residential Addresses: Dublin and Rest of Ireland, 2003/2004'**

| Dublin City Address | No. Persons | Greater Dublin Address | No. Persons |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ballinteer, Dublin 14 | 4 | Ballybrack, Co. Dublin | 6 |
| Ballyboden, Dublin 16 | 7 | Dun Laoighaire, Co Dublin | 8 |
| Blackhorse Av., Dublin 7 | 7 | Kinsealy, Co Dublin | 3 |
| Blackrock, Co Dublin | 11 | Leixlip, Co Kildare | 1 |
| Cabra, Dublin 7 | 1 | Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin | 5 |
| Carrickmines, Dublin 18 | 4 | | |
| Castleknock, Dublin 15 | 10 | | |
| Clarehall, Dublin 13 | 8 | | |
| Clondalkin, Dublin 22 | 95 | | |
| Clonsilla, Dublin 15 | 2 | **Rest of Ireland Address** | **No. Persons** |
| Clonskeagh Road, Dublin 1 | 3 | Ballybeg, Waterford | 22 |
| Coolock, Dublin 17 | 55 | Drogheda, Co Louth | 24 |
| Darndale, Dublin 17 | 22 | Gorey, Co Wexford | 4 |
| Gardiner Street, Dublin 1 | 3 | Portlaoise, Co. Laois | 18 |
| Kilbarrack, Dublin 13 | 7 | | |
| Knocklyon, Dublin 16 | 5 | | |
| N. Circular Rd, Dublin 3 | 3 | | |
| North Strand Road, Dublin | 1 | | |
| Raheny, Dublin 5 | 6 | | |
| Rathfarnam, Dublin 14 | 16 | | |
| Ringsend, Dublin 4 | 7 | | |
| Santry, Dublin 9 | 7 | | |
| Swords, Co Dublin | 2 | | |
| Tallaght, Dublin 24 | 145 | | |

**Figure 15: 'Residential Addresses: Dublin City, Greater Dublin, and Rest of Ireland'**
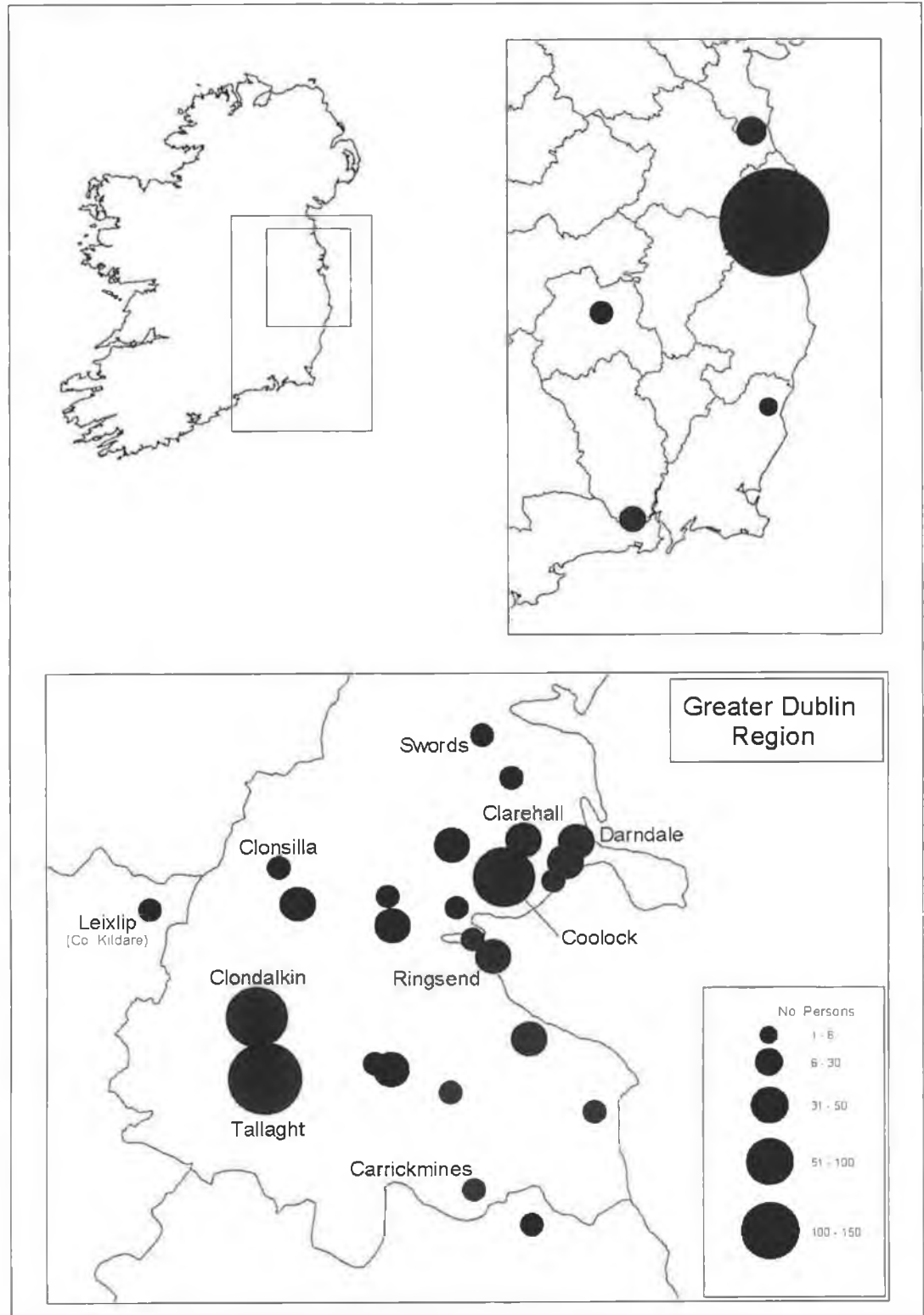
As we can see the majority of Vietnamese-Irish persons are living in the Greater Dublin region. Within Dublin, the majority reside in areas such as Clondalkin, Tallaght or Coolock and Clarehall. Many live in local authority homes, while others have purchased private homes.

The size of Vietnamese-Irish families varies considerably. One family that I know particularly well has nearly 100 members, and this does not include members who reside in other countries but are still in regular contact. At the extreme opposite level, there are family units with no more than 4 members. However, the tendency is towards large families, and in many cases residence is in extended units, with a mother, father and children often living with grandparents or the spouse of a young adult in the same house. Most Vietnamese-Irish people live in standard three of four-bedroom semi-detached houses. Some younger generation members do live in apartments, but the majority still reside with their parents. House sizes then have an effect on household composition, with the tendency being for a family to be spread out across several homes in the same geographical area, or across Dublin City depending on upward mobility.

Below, I have included a non-standard diagram to represent the connections that stretch across 7 households to comprise the fairly typical corporate structure of the Nguyen (pseudonym) family. This diagram is purposely taken from un-edited field notes and is therefore for illustrative purposes only. In terms of kinship, a male oriented patrilineal system may be observed. In Vietnamese this is called *ho.* But the boxes mark a contrary system of households called *nha,* which makes the system bilateral. Because a wife remains in her ancestral *ho* on marriage, she literally brings her family connections with her. *Nha* stands for an intense solidarity of family members in home units; *ho* is corporate and includes the dead and far

away: it is also religion—the grandparents of today are the deities of tomorrow through ancestor worship. This is a system of solidarity that moves beyond the walls of the house to create a sense of family reinforced by sentiment, often played out in businesses and reified by religious belief. Of course, what is not represented below is the set of relations, the brothers and sisters, uncles and nephews of this family in Norway, Paris, and the USA, not to mention Vietnam, that are *in absentia*:

**Figure 16: 'Illustration of Vietnamese-Irish Extended Family'**

Le Family Mr Le is 81 years old and has 2 unmarried sons of 36 and 31 years working in a takeaway business. They live in a West Dublin housing estate. His daughter (51) married one of the Nguyen family.

Mr Nguyen's brother lives here with Ms Thai and four of their children (the fifth child is in the UK). The children range in age from 20 to 26 years. Mr Nguyen co-owns a takeaway business with his brother. The two eldest children work in the takeaway business, while the others are in full-time education

Mr Nguyen (52) is married to Ms Le. They have 6 children, five females and one male, ranging in age from 16 to 26 years. The two oldest daughters are administrators while the others are in full-time education. Mr Nguyen owns one takeaway business and co-owns another. All the children live in the family's four-bedroom house in West Dublin

This Mr Nguyen is the 72-year-old eldest brother and family head. He is retired and married to Ms Pham, who lives with her husband, her mother and father, and with her single sister (55). They have eight children, five of whom live here in this five-bedroom home in Santry. Two male children work in their uncle's takeaway business. One daughter is an administrator while the others are in technical colleges

The last of Mr Nguyen's sons (34 years) lives in a Dublin City apartment with his 'Irish' wife and their two children, school-going girls of 10 and 12 years of age.

Mr Nguyen's (family head) 39-year-old son lives in Coolock with his wife and two children, aged 17 and 19 years. One is in school while the other attends university

Mr Nguyen's (family head) son lives in Coolock with his wife and children, four boys aged between 13 and 21 years. He works in a computer factory, and 3 of his sons are in school, while the eldest is preparing to emigrate

In today's world family connections may be latent and may be brought to the foreground only at certain times: anniversaries, specific celebrations, the

holiday season or as a resource for certain activities, etc. This is what Anthony Giddens describes as the 'sectional' style of modern lives. What marks off the above as different is that here there is a network of active connections that traverse everyday life. In the above instance the overwhelming financial input into this network is from a series of takeaway businesses. These businesses are owned by individuals but operated by the larger family network, which provides capital, labour and even security. Take the following account by a senior Vietnamese-Irish man of his early years in the ethnic food niche:

> Some friends and me got the money to put one family into the business and we tried to learn about the cooking, the grub! There was very little Chinese food in Ireland at that time. I learned to cook from some people who worked in a Chinese restaurant and after that I showed other people how to cook. In 1984, I was working on a corner near a bus stop— we were only making a living. The police and the 'Corpo' locked the caravan. I got all my family, and they came out and blocked all the cars on the road. They arrested me and took me to the station.
> We were only trying to get money, a little money for our family. If you have no money you have to do something, but we got into trouble. They arrested me and my whole family blocked the road, the cars. I was arrested but they didn't get the caravan. I was the first one to buy a shop in Dublin and get out of the caravans.

As one might expect, labour during weekends, the busy times in the takeaway business, is often drawn from young relatives and is sometimes given grudgingly. As one younger generation girl noted:

> They tell you to study, but you're supposed to be working as well. I don't mind helping out but it's just that it's, like, all the time. ... You go to work in the afternoon and you're back in the middle of the night. And if you're not working you're supposed to be studying. The last time I went to the cinema with me mates I was snoring after the lights went down!

Therefore, we may say that the takeaways are family businesses in every sense of the term. A younger generation woman described her part-time work in a

takeaway as she grew up, 'It was never about us, about being, like, an ordinary part-time job for pocket money. Everything I made I gave to my mother.' Takeaways draw from the resources of labour across generations and across genders; they make use of the family, and without the family they could not operate. Interestingly, basic preparation for this kind of work was carried out in some family homes during the early years in Ireland and, though this no longer takes place, the takeaway business is still seen by many Vietnamese-Irish people as an extension of the kitchen. One elderly Chinese-Vietnamese man argued that traditional cultural practices folded neatly into the ethnic food niche:

> This adapted to the Vietnamese here, and the culture is still something like this. Here it is the same, all the takeaways here they have a very hard-working woman. If you go into a shop, you know, a takeaway, you always saw a woman, with the power around her. All the successful takeaways, they have a strong woman. The Vietnamese takeaway is like a kitchen: the old father is more powerful than the young father; the young people have to obey their parents; and everybody obeys the ancestors' altar.

An element of sentiment exists here, of course, in that the complex idea of the Vietnamese 'woman of the house' as *nội trưởng,* or the 'general within', resonates with notions of Vietnamese 'tradition' and stamps a practice that is more of the here and now than of the past with the mark of legitimacy.

Takeaway businesses both reflect and support a particular way of life that is perhaps more properly addressed through the lens of family itself. Particularly for the older generation, these broad, corporate-style networks contain not just kin but also business partners and trusted friends; these are reservoirs not just of labour but also of capital and, crucially, of information. Also, such family-based networks can, in many instances, be seen as the Irish chapter of larger, multinational organisations that stretch from Tallaght to Houston, Texas and on to Hué. In short,

family looks like it is at the beginning and at the end of many Vietnamese-Irish people's meaningful horizon.

In his article in the journal *Management* in the early 1980s, Pat Nolan drew attention to a distinct Vietnamese-Irish 'racial mix' and suggested that they would succeed in Ireland because they would be compelled to put family and 'work first'. This crude stereotype did what much writing about refugee or emigrant populations does: he located the conditions for particular ways of life in the people themselves—now their economic adaptation and their social integration would be down to their psychology and their cultural synergy with the host society. The particular style of Vietnamese-Irish family life, and the tendency for people to have one eye on the wider *Viet Kieu* or Vietnamese diaspora while at the same time maintaining a certain insularity here is as much due to conditions in Ireland as it is to tradition, culture or whatever is currently signified by the word 'race'. Just as Pat Nolan signposted the emergence of the ethnic food niche as an emergent opportunity one could just as easily argue that this is little more than segregation in the labour market and that often little choice exists for those employed in this niche. Several informants have forcefully made the point to me that levels of English language ability, poor integration and what I would call structural neglect are also deeply implicated in forming the conditions for the picture I have so far sketched of Vietnamese-Irish life.

I will be looking in closer detail at this portrait and examining it from a variety of perspectives. Culture is, of course, a synthesis of stability and change, and the most provocative markers of change are to be found in the everyday lives of the younger generations. I will be arguing that fairly dramatic changes can be observed amongst the younger generation of Vietnamese-Irish people but,

paradoxically, this transformation may only be understood fully in terms of the cultural fabric so obvious in the older generation.

**Memories**

Vietnamese-Irish people used the phrase, 'the country that gave him his freedom took his life,' to capture both the emotion and the state of mind following a terrible tragedy. I understood, after a time, that this reflected a larger story. This story was not just revealed through a resonant phrase, which seemed like the meaningful tip of a larger cultural entity, it was also refracted through everyday material culture. In the home of a Vietnamese-Irish man, a photograph hung over his telephone table which depicted his wife and himself standing outside their hall door. The local authority house in the photograph was of the variety of which even an estate agent could not positively spin: one window was entirely boarded up and red graffiti had been sprayed across the wood in such a way that the whole effect resembled a poster for a Hammer-horror film. This photograph now hung in a bright and expensively decorated private house and seemed out of place or from somewhere else. I described this interesting photograph and its context to a young Vietnamese-Irish man and immediately he explained:

> You see I know why he did that. He wanted a memory. He wanted something to show him, and show his family … show what it was like. It was difficult you see. He was probably proud of his success and proud of what his family had done and wanted to have a memory to think about.

Memory is particularly interesting in that, as a word used by Vietnamese-Irish people, it comes around more than once. The ethnographic style of this research was helped by formal interviews during which I was often thanked for provoking memories and for recording them for the future. It seemed that memory's time had

come, so to speak. The twenty-five year anniversary of the first Vietnamese refugees arriving in Ireland was near; the next generation had just come of age and new ways of seeing the world and of seeing one's self were apparent. It seemed that just as a shift in ways of living occurred on departure from Vietnam, now another Rubicon was being crossed and a new cultural form was to take shape— and now the old one could be recorded as memory.

Lewis Namier has written that while one would expect people to remember the past and imagine the future, 'when discoursing or writing about history, they imagine it in terms of their own experiences, and when trying to gauge the future they cite supposed analogies from the past: till, by a double process of repetition, they imagine the past and remember the future'.[127] When Vietnamese-Irish people discuss the takeaway business, their families and hopes for their children, or any number of other themes, they are often doing the work of memory—imagining and remembering. And, imagining and remembering has a spatial underpinning, in homes, photographs and shrines to ancestors, to name but a few aspects of life. Herein I discuss this underpinning as enshrining.

Thus far, I have outlined a rough sketch of the present situation for Vietnamese-Irish people and coloured this in with their ideas, words and memories. To focus in on finer detail requires an examination, first, of how Vietnam is imagined and remembered and, secondly, an examination of the proximity of the past, Vietnam and the wider diaspora in Vietnamese-Irish lives.

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[127] Lewis B. Namier, *Conflicts: Studies in Contemporary History* (London: Macmillian, 1942), p. 70.

## Chapter 3: When the Past is in a Foreign Country: Vietnam, Memory and Diaspora

From China, the Yuen people travelled south, and killed
the Thai, the Khmers, the Mongs and the Chams from the
Kingdom of Funan.  As a result of their 'Marching towards
the South,' the Yuen became independent, the Viet.

Then for ten centuries the Chinese waged war and killed
the Vietnamese and called Vietnam, Annam, which means
'The Pacified South.'

The French killed the Vietnamese and
Occupied the country for a century.
The Vietnamese who fought the French
were called the Viet Minh.
The French and the Vietnamese killed
the Viet Minh (secretly helped by the Americans).
The Japanese killed the French.
The Japanese allied with the French killed
the Chinese and the Viet Minh.
The Japanese helped the Vietnamese to proclaim
the independence of Vietnam.
The Japanese killed the French and were defeated.
The Americans helped the Viet Minh to become
the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The French and their allies, the British,
killed the Viet Minh.
The French, equipped by the Americans, lost to
the Viet Minh, equipped by the Chinese.
The Americans took the place of the French.
The Viet Minh were called the Viet Cong.

The Vietcong, armed by China and the USSR,
killed the Vietnamese and the Americans.
The Vietcong prevailed.

People fled overseas.

—*History* by Thuong Vuong-Riddick[128]

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[128] Thuong Vuong-Riddick, 'History,' in Barbara Tran, Monique T. D. Truong and Luu
Truong Khoi (eds.), *Watermark: Vietnamese American poetry and prose* (New York:
Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 17-18.

For both first and second-generation Vietnamese-Irish people identity emerges in dialogue with the past. For those who settled in Ireland from the late 1970s onwards this dialogue is forceful in their daily lives and is often articulated through the pleasure of being able to travel 'home' when possible. Some engage with homeland politics and make investments in former villages or neighbourhoods. Most families in Ireland find a resonance with the past through the medium of the extended family networks that stretch across the globe and go towards making up the Vietnamese diaspora or *Viet Kieu*. These transnational contacts are sometimes made painful with memories of war or of missing relatives. For the older generation their relationship with 'home' might well be understood through the dynamic interaction between identity and memory; yet, the older generation is also 'Irish' in terms of citizenship, work, children and the future.

For members of the second-generation travel to Vietnam is not a trip home. Their identity is played out more on the Irish side of the hyphen. Yet, for those younger people who were born in Ireland a Vietnamese past is still refracted through half-remembered childhood karaoke sessions in which 'traditional' songs were sung, eating Asian food or through their variable understanding of the Vietnamese language, for example. In the lives of some, marginality as a member of a minority has influenced their identity: some second-generation people describe themselves simply as Vietnamese because they have grown up in a country where being Vietnamese-Irish still not a believable identity. In this generation the Vietnamese side of the hyphen is somehow estranged from them and yet is still an intimate aspect of their everyday lives.

In order to further this discussion one must ask some fairly straightforward questions. For example one might ask: what does one need to know about Vietnam and about Vietnamese culture and history in order to understand more about Vietnamese-Irish identity? During numerous visits to Vietnamese-Irish homes these questions were brought to the foreground by casual observation of actions and of social styles and manners. For example, once as I sat in the living room of a Vietnamese-Irish man of Chinese ethnicity I noted the range of cultural variation in the first, second and third generation in his home. As a student of Vietnamese culture, this older man spoke to me for several hours and patiently explained the minutiae of Southeast Asian history. 'You must learn in the very old times how the Vietnamese culture happen … it comes from the line', he began. As he spoke his youngest daughter and his sister worked in the kitchen and spoke to each other in Vietnamese. 'The clan they live together as a small group, they work together … they created the language', he explained. His grandchild ran in circles from the kitchen to the hallway and into the living room, utterly absorbed in one of those childhood games in which the rules are entirely dependent on whether you are winning or not. In this game I was supposed to be trying to trip her up as she ran. When I finally understood my role, I stuck out my foot and just missed her. She continued running in circles but was so convulsed with laughter that she began to crash into the furniture like a drunkard. His daughter interrupted us to apologise, 'She is very young', she said as her eyes glanced towards the speeding child. 'My father is very good on culture. He teaches all the children.' She tried to catch the young girl on her next circuit, missed and cursed under her breath. 'Colonisation … the Chinese culture, the Chinese writing, the Chinese character, up to the 19th

century the Vietnamese used the Chinese character and they just changed some words for the sound close to the South', the elderly man continued. His tone and manner was that of a practiced teacher. Each Sunday he would organise the children in his neighbourhood to gather in a nearby school for a few hours of instruction in traditions and religion (Confucianism with a hint of Buddhism in this instance). He was well educated and much admired. Now into his seventies, he had been in Ireland for only ten years and had migrated here through the Family Reunification Scheme. What he spoke of to me was not an abstract matter to him but, rather, tradition in the sense of something that is at once reified, tangible and alive in everyday life.

I could not help wondering at the meaning of his elegant descriptions of ancient practices and myths for his daughter. She was born in Vietnam but left at a young age. For her 'culture' was theoretical and reified in the same way that it was for her father—it was something you studied, and perhaps took an exceptional interest in—yet what she did in her everyday life was not 'culture' in this sense. Here is one of the most curious aspects of writing about the younger generation: few see themselves as particularly diverse or as culturally interesting. When questioned on their parents' world-views they speak fluently of difference, point to the ornate ancestors' altars that are found in most houses and talk about food and the role of education. Yet, to talk about themselves and their own lives is to leave that abstract notion of culture behind and, when probed about beliefs and values, the questions seemed to over-extend their explanations. As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously noted: 'If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is

simply what I do".'[129]  And, what of the grandchild running in circles?  If one could fast forward ten or more years would she be helping her mother in a kitchen while chatting in Vietnamese on a Sunday morning?

These questions have been forming for twenty-five years.  To begin to answer these questions is to engage with issues that range from how 'traditions' and values are articulated here and now in Dublin, the role the past plays, and the presence of Vietnam in memory and in transnational connections.  These issues are not unique to Ireland and are being asked in research from Norway to France and the United States, across the range of experiences that together go towards comprising the Vietnamese diaspora or *Viet Kieu*.  This great exodus of people has generated hundreds of scholarly books and research papers, popular texts and media articles.  In the first ten or so years many of these works followed a similar structure by recounting a narrative of the Vietnam War and attempting to account for how Vietnamese culture was altered in new homes around the world—the process of acculturation, the prospects of assimilation along the lines of language, education or employment.

I have a larger concern with interrogating models of cultural change that runs throughout this work, and here, specifically, I am concerned with the past as it is brought to life in the present.  I will attempt to demonstrate that, while research on Vietnamese identity internationally can benefit by moving beyond the Vietnam War and 'refugee studies' towards more contemporary concerns, to focus intently on the present and imagine a great gulf separating it from the past is to ignore the work of memory and transnational connections in the dynamics

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[129] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, third edition, translated by G. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 217.

of identity formation.[130]    My interest here is also with notions of 'tradition' for

the Vietnamese-Irish and I argue that their understanding of 'tradition' curiously

synergistic with the mobilisation of the same concept in scholarly work.  I will

sketch out how the past is remembered by those that I spoke to as well as making

the point that Vietnamese history is tradition on the move—a story of migration.

**History**

The epigraph to this chapter, Thuong Vuong-Riddick's poem 'History',

captures and condenses many interesting themes.  It is an ironic poem that in a

matter-of-fact way narrates the absurdity of history as a linear set of events,

which if retold in the correct sequence will reveal an underlying order—an

incantation for conjuring historical neatness.  Particularly when it comes to

recent Vietnamese history, it is difficult to rationally chart moments made

complex by overlapping interests, such as policies made in Beijing, Paris,

London or Washington that often had unintended consequences in the mangle of

experience in Southeast Asia.  The hallucinatory quality of Vietnam's recent

century of war has been frequently commented on and cannot be ignored.[131]

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[130] Chan Kwok Bun and Kenneth Christie have noted that the story of the Vietnam War
has been endlessly replayed at the expense of 'state of the art' research.  See Chan Kwok
Bun and Kenneth Christie, 'Past, Present and the Future: The Indochinese Refugee
Experience Twenty Years Later', *Journal of Refugee Studies,* vol. 8, no. 1 (1995), pp.
75-93.

[131] The history of the Vietnam War era is also extremely difficult to follow in terms of
the political alliances and factions that often had little real importance.  According to the
radical scholar Francis Fitzgerald: 'In Saigon, it was said, two men constituted a party,
three men a party and a faction.'  See Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The
Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam.* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and
Company, 1972), p. 239.  The hallucination-like quality of the Vietnam War and the
absurdity it generated has been well documented through a variety of media.  See for
example Tim O'Brien's National Book Award-winning novel *Going After Cacciato* in
which a private deserts his post in Vietnam to walk to Paris for the peace talks. The
search for Cacciato involves soldiers following a trail of chocolate M&M's through the

When Richard Nixon described the invasion of Cambodia as a step towards peace, commentators would clearly be faced with the challenge to write an account of the play of history in an era that seemed to have been stage-managed by Walter Benjamin's angel of history—and that's only from the American side. Perhaps, more than most, Graham Green sensed that the 20th century saw a great geopolitical play begin in Southeast Asia in which the stage conventions had been suspended. An evocative scene in *The Quiet American* has the tired colonial and the young American arguing over a Vietnamese woman whose life neither had bothered to comprehend, with no sense of the absurdity of the situation.[132]

The most interesting aspect of scholarship on Vietnam is the manner in which the notion of tradition is at play within a history of incredible cultural transformation. And history is itself a conundrum: Vietnam was for centuries conquered, influenced and shaped by a powerful neighbour, China, yet maintained a certain cultural distance that would be mobilised time and time again for resistance in the name of Vietnam. This has prompted the historian Alexander Woodside to comment: 'The Vietnamese nation is, to put it bluntly, one of the longest enduring acts of faith in human history.'[133] Of course, traditions are usually the one thing that they claim not to be—inventions, and the idea of a traditional Vietnamese culture is no exception. However, one might

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jungles of Indochina to Europe. See Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1989).

[132] Graham Green, *The Quiet American* (New York and London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 146-147.

[133] Alexander Woodside, 'Vietnamese History: Confucianism, Colonialism and the Struggle for Independence,' in Donald W.P. Elliott, Gerald Cannon Hickey, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Hue Tam Ho Tai and Alexander Woodside (eds.) *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture and Society* (New York: The Asia Society, 1985), p. 5. A note of caution is needed here: one must be careful of stretching the nation too far back into the past—nations are thoroughly modern rather than being thoroughly ancient.

also argue that traditions, no matter what their origins, may appear to have a greater or lesser realism. And the notion that Vietnamese traditions are fixed and arise from the depths of culture would score highly on any index of realism.

Historically, one of the reasons for culture being conceived of with a capital 'C' in Vietnam has been the scholarly contribution of the Mandarin class. Alexander Woodside has suggested how this 'elite of history-addicted bookworms and bibliophiles' directed their scholarship not towards invention and progress but towards a more perfect repetition of the past. Legend has it that when the first French steamship was sighted off the coast of Vietnam in the 19th century the local Mandarin-Governor, instead of going to see it, researched it in his texts, concluded that it was a dragon and promptly dismissed the matter.

The past has a long history in Vietnam, conceived of as static, unchanging tradition. This was augmented by early French scholarship, and later by US cultural thinkers and anthropologists. Following in the footsteps of French ethnologist Paul Mus, the radical scholar and journalist Francis Fitzgerald argued that traditional Vietnamese village life was 'absolutely inelastic':

> The traditional Vietnamese lived by constant repetition, by the sowing and reaping of rice and by the perpetuation of customary law. The Vietnamese worshiped their ancestors as the source of their lives, their fortunes, and their civilisation. In the rites of ancestor worship the child imitates the gestures of his grandfather so that when he became the grandfather, he could repeat them exactly to his grandchildren. In a passage of time that had no history the death of a man marked no final end. … As time wrapped around itself, the generations to come would regard him as the source of their present lives and the arbiter of their fate. In this continuum of the family 'private property' did not really exist, for the father was less of an owner than a trustee of the land to be passed to his children. To the Vietnamese land itself was the sacred, constant element: the people flowed over the land like water, maintaining and fructifying it for the generations to come.[134]

Francis Fitzgerald's prose resonates with Elizabeth Bowen's description of her family inhabiting 'a continuous, semi-physical dream', yet in both instances the intensity of living in one place still argues with the relationship to that very place.[135]

What French ethnologists such as Paul Mus found were Vietnamese villages (*lang* or *xa*) often physically sealed off from the world behind bamboo fences, particularly in the North, and divided into clusters called *ap*. Each village had a meetinghouse and shrine (or *dinh*) and a council of notables called *hoi lang*. These were administrative units through which communal lands were managed and taxes paid by produce from these and other private lands, and for the average of 500-1000 residents a measure of limited self-government obtained, albeit in the hands of powerful families.[136]

Vietnamese culture seemed, therefore, to be conveniently located for those who were intent on studying it, and when Gerald Canon Hickey came to write his controversial classic of Vietnamese studies in the 1960s, *Village in Vietnam,* an entire cultural universe was mapped out in one settlement. In Hickey's work, the village of Khanh Hau is described from every angle: settlement patterns, ancestor worship and other religious practices, family and kinship, livelihood, administration, social class and mobility are all described in superb detail. Each perspective drawn by Hickey adds to a growing and detailed diagram of a people bound together and to the land through the serene interweaving of family life, work and belief. Such categories of life were as

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[134] Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 9.
[135] Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*, p. 451.
[136] Mark W. McLeod and Nguyen Thi Dieu, *Culture and Customs of Vietnam* (Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1996), pp. 22-23 passim.

proximate to one another as the villagers were to each other—they often quoted the proverb: 'Sell distant kin, buy close neighbours.'[137]

Much of Hickey's writing is comprised of close descriptions of material culture and livelihood practices but, occasionally, an almost pastoral romanticism emerges through the detail:

> In the fields they labour together, and when work is done they gather to pass leisure time in the house or a nearby shop. Adult members of the household group invariably take meals together, and at night, young and old share the hardwood beds. The yearly cycle is marked by a series of family celebrations in which all members of the kin group participate and, as the villager's life spins on, family rites of passage mark the movement from infancy into childhood, on to adolescence, and finally into adulthood and old age. Death is no real departure from the family—one joins the ancestors to exist as an unseen but nonetheless present member.[138]

This was no society at peace with itself, however. One has to remind oneself that *Village in Vietnam* was written during a time of war, a conflict that always seems indistinct in the blind spot of the author's gaze. One also has to note that an entirely different text could have been written simply by focusing on change rather than on stability. The serene world captured in romantic prose appears less fixed when one learns that the villagers' ancestors were migrants from northern and central Vietnam—the south of Vietnam was only settled in fits and starts through *Nam tien* or the Southward Movement in the 16th and 17th centuries and really only took on a recognisable form in the 18th century. This little universe also begins to appear porous to outside forces: Hickey has to explain the demographics of the village by going into the migration of men to fight with the *Viet Minh*, the urbanisation that arose as a consequence of changes to land

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[137] Gerald Canon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 96.

holdings brought about during French imperialism, and he noted that migration was the 'outstanding feature of Vietnamese history'.[139]

Though imperialism induced many changes this was rarely reflected in scholarship.[140] While the largest population movements remained seasonal and for agricultural labour, during the high noon of French rule, 1859-1954, populations were displaced through rural to urban migrations of landless people and through the Shanghaiing of wage labourers to work in the mining industry or on plantations.[141] In the 1930s rubber plantations may have only employed about 40,000 persons but they left a searing impression on the national imagination. The conditions in which the workers were kept and treated was reminiscent of the horrors uncovered by Sir Roger Casement in the Congo and in the Putumayo—each year one quarter of the workers died on plantations where, in the words of the journalist Diep Lien Anh, 'children did not have a chance to know their fathers nor dogs their masters'.[142]

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[138] *Ibid.,* p. 99.

[139] *Ibid.,* p. 48.

[140] No justice is done to the cultural history of the early French influence in Vietnam through the use of the blanket term 'imperialism'. Adventure, missionary work and brutal exploitation were all ingredients, but so too was pure accident. The cast of characters on the French side included that luminary of the Irish diaspora Thomas de Conway, Governor of the French Base at Pondicherry, who once plotted to overthrow George Washington while fighting with the Americans. The historical opera also included the missionary Pigneau de Béhaine who attempted to Svengali Louis XVI into sending an army to assist the pretender to the Vietnamese throne, Nguyen Anh. That scholarship on Vietnam has been blind to imperialism has been noted elsewhere. Gisele L. Bousquet makes the point that the static view of 'traditional' Vietnam was later taken up by the nationalist movement. See Gisele L. Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux (eds.), *Viêt-Nam Exposé: French Scholarship on Twentieth-century Vietnamese Society* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1998). Exceptions include, Virginia Thompson, *French Indo-china* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968).

[141] Anh Dang, Sidney Goldstein and James McNally, 'Internal Migration and Development in Vietnam', *International Migration Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, (1997), pp. 312-337. Robin Cohen has also looked at the French encouragement of Chinese immigration to French Indochina. See Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), p. 86.

[142] Ngô Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: the Vietnamese Peasants under the French* (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 112.

Despite the brutal coherence of the results, French imperialism was little more than fumbling effort to transform an agricultural land into a useful producer for an international market, while serving geopolitical interests and muttering about civilisation. Urbanisation was one consequence. In her radical masterpiece, *Fire in the Lake,* Francis Fitzgerald was to describe Saigon as, 'that parasite city that fattened from the blood of the countryside and the lucre of the West'.[143] Poverty was another consequence. In 1937 one famous Vietnamese journalist suggested that the poor could be divided into three categories:

> … people whose meals included bran and a few vegetables (like the diets of the pigs of rich landowners); people who lived on bran and water (like the diets of the pigs of poorer property owners); and people who could not afford any bran, but nourished themselves by tasting samples of bran in their local markets while pretending to bargain with the bran sellers.[144]

By the 1950s, the twilight of French rule, war had become a major force in population movement, and the political settlement after the defeat at *Ðiên Biên Phù* in 1954 resulted in one of the more extraordinary refugee flows of the 20th century. The major powers had agreed a provisional demarcation line at the 17th parallel, dividing Vietnam pending political settlement to be achieved through nationwide elections. Soon thereafter General J. Lawton Collins, President Eisenhower's special envoy, arrived in Saigon to affirm American support for South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem, which included $100 million in aid. Diem requested American support in transporting and resettling those people who wished to leave the North. With the help of the US 7th Fleet some 860,000

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[143] Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 100.
[144] Alexander Woodside, 'Vietnamese History: Confucianism, Colonialism and the Struggle for Independence' in Donald W.P. Elliott, Gerald Cannon Hickey, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Hue Tam Ho Tai and Alexander Woodside (eds.), *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture and Society* (New York: The Asia Society, 1985), p. 14.

people migrated. The vast majority of them were Catholics who were persuaded to leave by intense propaganda, which included posters declaring that the Virgin Mary had gone to the South. In July 1955 the border was sealed, and years later many of this same population would be refugees once more, with a few of their number ending up in Ireland.

But the greatest changes were still to come in the American leg of the Vietnam War. According to Ngô Vinh Long, 'by 1972, according to U.S. official sources, American bombing and pacification efforts in the southern half of Vietnam had been responsible for over 10 million refugees and up to 2 million deaths out of a total estimated population of less than 19 million'.[145] One of the often-ignored themes of the history of the Vietnam War is the use of migration as a weapon: under the reign of President Ngo Dinh Diem 'agrovilles' and 'prosperity centres' were used to remove bothersome populations of many varieties; but it was the Strategic Hamlet Program, the brain child of the British advisor Sir Robert Thompson, that wrought the most damage. These fortified hamlets became the unwanted new homes of countless farmers and traders and presented convenient targets for insurgents. Harvard academics later expanded on this notion, suggesting that the war could be won by so-called 'force-draft urbanisation'.

Thus, the modern history of Vietnam may be narrated through a story of migration. Clearly, the exodus of so-called boat people in the late 1970s has formed a substantial recent chapter. Communist rule in Vietnam rendered life untenable for many groups, such as ethnic Chinese, supporters of South Vietnam and allies of the USA or France, to name but a few. Urbanisation has also

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[145] Ngô Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*, p. 112.

continued at a high rate since the 1970s, a process set in train during the War, when communist forces could prophesise that a country of 'foreign-aid junkies' who were 'addicted to America' was being produced.[146] This internal migration is but one index of a rapidly changing society. In the immediate post war period the USSR's support was simply not enough to buoy up the reunited Vietnam, particularly when wars with China and Cambodia marked its first years. In the early 1980s the standard joke ran: 'Moscow cables Vietnam: "Tighten your belts."' To which Vietnam replies: 'Send belts.'[147] A decade later the historian Stanley Karnow could ask Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach if his country was embracing capitalism and receive the following reply: 'Absolutely not! We have simply adopted a market economy and the laws of supply and demand.'[148] The opening of Vietnam through *Doi Moi*, or the new change, has raised the possibilities now of another form of migration: the transnational movement of former refugees and their families backwards and forwards from new homes to Vietnam. Before this may be considered in conjunction with memory, however, it is necessary to reintroduce the question of culture.

While one may now argue that conceiving of the Vietnamese-Irish as people who have left a traditional culture behind is historically problematic, it is still interesting to reflect on how an obvious *difference* exists when those same people, and a variety of scholars and commentators, think of Vietnam and the word 'culture' together. What is interesting is precisely how serene and rooted

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[146] Donald W. P. Elliott, 'Waiting for the East Wind: Revolution and Social Change in Modern Vietnam' in Donald W.P. Elliott, Gerald Cannon Hickey, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Hue Tam Ho Tai and Alexander Woodside (eds.), *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture and Society*, pp. 100-123.
[147] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1997) p. 53.
[148] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

people's lives may appear despite the frenzy of history and dislocation. French commentators believed they had seen the 'silentness, the congealedness' of the 'old Asiatic world' when they witnessed the last great Mandarin mathematics examinations at the turn of the last century.[149] And, when one reads Gerald Canon Hickey's meticulous descriptions of how certain Vietnamese ages (that have no apparent connection, such as 23 and 31) are unlucky and may overlap with zodiacal signs that are themselves divided in to three groups of four animal years, one is reminded of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* in which the savant describes 16th century European philosophers worrying about words, because certain letters might fight with each other.[150]

Doubtless French commentators and American anthropologists encountered the very foreignness of Vietnam, with the foreign country appearing to have a static past. But *difference* is emergent in change and in migration, and one must be careful in using the notion of culture in a way that allows it to carry a cluster of associated words, such as tradition and custom. As an explanatory device 'culture' has a limited utility. For the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein all devices of the mind were to be treated with suspicion, because we require them, '… for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is

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[149] On the French commentators see Alexander Woodside, 'Vietnamese History: Confucianism, Colonialism and the Struggle for Independence, in Donald W.P. Elliott, Gerald Cannon Hickey, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Hue Tam Ho Tai and Alexander Woodside (eds.) *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture and Society*, p. 21; see also Susan Sontag, *Trip to Hanoi* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Grioux, 1968).
[150] According to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, traditionally there was a plethora of ghosts, spirits and deities in rural Vietnam and an even greater variety of rules and observances. Language had its role to play: saying a word conjured an object, and dangerous things like tigers, crocodiles and emperors were hardly mentioned at all, and then only in whispers. See Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'Religion in Vietnam: A World of Gods and Spirits,' in Donald W.P. Elliott, *et al, Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture and Society*, pp. 22-40. For an excellent discussion of the cultural variation enshrined through a different configuration of person, time and conduct see Clifford Geertz's essay on Balinese naming in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 360-411.

an architectural one; the definition a kind of ornamental coping that supports

nothing.'[151]

## Remembering, Again

My family were from South Vietnam. We lived outside [...], about 100 kilometres from Saigon, which is now called Ho Chi Minh City. It was a big city then. Before 1975 there was very hard fighting between the Viet Cong and the Government there. We lived there, and during the war things were very difficult; it was difficult because of the fighting ...

As a young boy of about 14, ... in secondary school ... I did not understand what was going on. But I was witness one morning to something. We went to school, but for some reason my brother was confused. It was early in the morning, about seven or eight o'clock in the morning. He forgot something, so we were late and a bomb just dropped in the village where all the children used to buy their breakfast. Almost everybody died. We were lucky: just because my brother was confused we survived. The bomb just dropped and a lot of children died that day – but we survived. About 40 died, but about 27 children.

The village was laid out in a triangle. There were three schools. There was a secondary school, and if you crossed the bridge there was a small school and there was also a Chinese school, and in the middle of the village there was a market where people sold food by the side of the road and the children would get their breakfast there.

Most people stayed in the same area. It was just a small village. Usually at night bombs dropped. You would try to be asleep but you had somewhere to slip, somewhere, when you hear the sound before the bomb drops and you have to hide. At night we were always awake.

In my point of view, then, I hate war because I have been witness to so many people dying for no reason... Just four houses away from mine as a child, there was a large family and a bomb dropped and killed the whole family. I was witness to that. So, I really, really hated war. The way people just died for no reason.

The Vietnamese-Irish man who recalled the above incident to me was

unambiguous in his feelings on war and on Vietnam's recent history. His disgust

for those who would take 'freedom' away was undisguised. For others,

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[151] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 217.

memories of the War had more of a fractured quality and their politics are more

ambiguous. Tan, now in his thirties, arrived in Ireland in 1979 as a child. His

indistinct early childhood memories are peppered with disturbing half-references

to war. He lived in a suburb of Saigon and recalled that just before the fall of the

city to communist forces in 1975 he was becoming aware of news coverage on

the family's television set that constantly spoke of advancing troops. His

questions were brushed aside by adults in such a practiced and nonchalant way

that he spent some considerable time thinking that the Vietnam War was

happening in some other country. In the years that followed, the hallucinatory

quality of his life was augmented by a dramatic escape from his home in the

middle of the night. In a small boat on the open sea, he survived an attack by

Thai pirates, and later he spent weeks recovering on an oilrig.

**Figure 17: 'Escape from Vietnam'**



(Courtesy of Kyros Communications Documentary, *Refugees: the Irish Experience,* 1992.)

Memories of Vietnam are also, usually, memories of escape and later of life in refugee camps. For one elderly woman her escape could be recalled in a conspiratorial tone that barely disguised a certain pride. She and her husband and young children availed of a good opportunity to escape when no one was paying attention—they enthusiastically joined a parade to commemorate the death of Ho Chi Minh and simply marched to the nearest port, banners and all, and sailed away. For others escape continues to be recalled with emotion:

> My story is very difficult because I saw so many things in my journey. Thai pirates robbed me, and I was towed away by the Malaysian Navy several times to the international line and then they cut the rope and just left you there. Sometimes they give you water but you didn't have enough to go back to Vietnam, and even if you had, what would you go back to? ... I tried not to think.
>
> So I tried again. The only choice you had was to come back to Malaysia. So we thought we would die with no food and no water. I am not lucky. I had to break the boat, and we all had to swim into the jungle. ... There was not enough food; there was no blanket to sleep on. Thank god we all survived and nobody was sick or anything like that.

The abiding impression one gets when one listens to people's memories about life in Vietnam is a sense of motion, a land in turmoil and a desire to leave and make a home elsewhere in the world. The following story illustrates this:

> I was born in a French hospital. I have a French birth certificate and I can go to France any time I want. I lived in so many villages, not just one, to the South of Saigon. The first village I lived in was not that big anyway. People used to go to holiday there, because there was a beach there. It is lovely now. Life was normal, and I just went to school everyday. I studied in Saigon in the '60s. At that time there was war all around us. The army was around everywhere and the people were afraid of the bombs. When I was in the college in Saigon, there were a lot of military on the streets. ...
>
> [*Many of his relatives died during the war*]
>
> It was difficult to get to Malaysia in 1978. The Malaysian Government didn't want boat people and got the Navy to tow you out. We thought we

might die in the sea because you could not go back to Vietnam. It was very difficult. A lot of people died at that time. Some people broke the boats; others died in the sea. I saw some people die in the sea. Pirates from Thailand they took the money, they raped women and attacked us.

But memories of Vietnam are as much shaped by the present as by the past. There is now the possibility of travelling 'home' and of bringing children to see their extended families. One young man recalled to me his current feelings about the country of his birth:

> I don't think you feel a risk going back, but somehow you do not feel so safe going back there either—you don't feel right, you don't have freedom of speech. Here it is so different, you can just open your mouth and openly talk about your ideas and things like that, which might in one way or another offend a person or the government system. ...
>
> It's not just me. The whole population wishes that things would change – and the sooner the better! I go on the Internet and a lot of people are involved. They call the people around the world to give them a hand to call for a more democratic Vietnam; they also call to the people in the country.

While an elderly woman appeared to have a more visceral and less political reaction to my raising the same topic:

> I miss country life, and my parents when I think back. I miss the graves of my parents. But now my family is here. I do miss the friendships and the way people help each other in country life. I try to go back to Vietnam twice a year. I have a sister in Vietnam. She brought her brother over here. They all come and visit. And I brought my children over to Vietnam. My brother has three kids in Vietnam, and one is unemployed so I'd like him to come over here. I miss the country and my ancestors graves more now.

It is difficult to gather precise figures on the numbers of Vietnamese-Irish persons who travel to Vietnam or the frequency of their visits but, qualitatively, it has been a strong life pattern amongst those people whom I have come to know. Indeed, it is a matter of pride for some that the Vietnamese Embassy in

London has noted their high frequency of travel to Vietnam. To examine the importance of this trend it is necessary to think about transnationalism, the spreading out of economic, social and other activities across the borders of nation-states. The term has become popular, particularly in discussions of migration, and it closely associated with globalisation, another fashionable yet elusive word. In any discussion of transnationalism one must think historically and ask whether or not the term is being used to describe new phenomena?

**The Vietnamese-Irish, Transnationalism and the Notion of Diaspora**

> Along with dual citizenship we shall have to accept, I think, that free and mobile passage of the immigrant between America and his native land again, which now arouses so much prejudice among us. We shall have to accept the immigrant's return for the same reason that we consider justified our own flitting about the earth. To stigmatise the alien … is to think in narrow nationalistic terms. It is to ignore the cosmopolitan significance of this migration.
> — *Randolph Bourne*[152]

Thinking about the above epigraph, drawn from an essay by Randolph Bourne, allows one to call to attention the importance of inquiring into the history of the notion of transnationalism. The transnationals of whom he spoke were not fleeing third-world disadvantage or political repression; they were not the Chinese entrepreneurs on business-class flights between work in Hong Kong and family in the United States who have earned the nickname 'astronauts'; nor were they the mobile Korean professionals that are sometimes described as engaging in 'commuter marriages'; rather, he was describing those who he understood to be escaping poverty, conflict and narrow-gauge nationalism *in*

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[152] Randolph Bourne, 'Transnational America,' *Atlantic Monthly*, 118, (July 1916), pp. 86-97.

*Europe.* This essay about transnationalism, something that is considered very new, was written about using the term transnationalism in 1916.

Bourne's concern was with the possibility that certain migration patterns not only challenge the shibboleths of nationalism but also carry the possibility of inaugurating new ways of thinking about and living in the nation. The importance of his essay today rests on its capacity to subvert, while its North American focus allows one to work through the strong literature on migration there. However, my concern is to consider the ways in which Vietnamese-Irish people engage with what it means to be Irish, either after or without a hyphen, while at the same time living within a landscape in which Hué, Houston, Texas, and Tallaght are significant spots on a meaningfully constituted horizon. Therefore, I am interested in the notions of transnationalism and diaspora, and I am interested in the problems and possibilities for a Vietnamese-Irishness in Ireland. The synthesis of these contrary tendencies, which are at once particular to the nation-state and thoroughly 'spaced out', unfolds in the everyday lives of the people concerned, in different ways depending on vividness of memory, family life, age, gender or a number other factors. Before we allow the ethnographic picture to develop fully, however, it is first important to stake out a position in relation to transnationalism and diaspora.[153]

Transnationalism has been much discussed lately. Over the past two decades the cognitive map of migration studies which depicted a world fractured by borders has dissolved and reformed as a world characterised by border crossings. Such a shift has raised all sorts of problems for the types of research that listen to people's voices amid the din of human migration. Migration has

been heavily studied in the United States, and I will briefly sketch some broad

trends in research there and in Europe to illustrate an equally broad argument.

It is commonly understood that there was a *belle époque* in American migration

studies, 1900 to the 1960s, characterised by contributions such as that of the

Chicago sociologist Robert Park.[154] This was an era dominated by attempts to

understand how different ethnic minorities 'assimilated' over generations which,

to kidnap one of Marshall Sahlins's analogies, resembled high-energy physics in

that it was the science of the disappearing. To Robert Park the question was:

how quickly would a migrant's ethnicity vanish? This found a symbolic

reflection in the Americanisation Movement's pageants, which were inspired by

Israel Zangwill's play *Melting Pot*, where dodgy-looking foreigners were

depicted jumping into a huge pot and emerging 'American' in appearance and

JFK-like in accent. What this melting might produce was what horrified

Randolph Bourne the most, 'a tasteless, colourless fluid of uniformity'.[155]

The so-called 'modern' period in migration studies was defined by a shift

in population flows in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By 1989 the *International

Migration Review* could publish a special, retrospective issue sketching out a

picture of change in population movement and theory over the previous two

decades plus. A variety of authors outlined the basic features of 'New-Wave'

migration and pointed to the demand for an elastic supply of labour in an era of

disorganised capital, pressure in third world economies and politics, and micro-

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[153] Curiously, it is still reasonable to say that the literature on transnationalism has not sufficiently incorporated research on refugees.

[154] See Barbara Heisler, 'The Future of Immigrant Incorporation: Which Models?' *International Migration Review*, vol. XXVI, no. 2, (Summer, 1992), pp. 623-645.

[155] Randolph Bourne, 'Transnational America,' p. 89.

structures that transcended nation-state borders.[156] But, the analytical use of terms such as 'transmigrant' alongside categories that emanated historically from governance—refugee, asylum seeker, economic migrant, etc.—continued to confuse.[157] In the well-known text *The Age of Migration* Stephen Castles pointed out that by the 1970s there were over 12 million immigrants in Western Europe and 'the process of ethnic minority formation had become irreversible'.[158] Simply conceived, by that time, the speed and extent of population movement, particularly South to North, effectively meant that those advocating assimilation or imagining melting pots were left, to paraphrase Fredrick Nietzsche, grasping at the smoke of an evaporating reality.

Some narratives are successful because they look more like reality than their competitors; but all narratives tell of how the past became the present precisely by facilitating the imagination of that past. When one re-reads the writings of Randolph Bourne, one may be struck by how ahead of his time he was; one might also be disturbed by the suspicion that we are misrepresenting the time in which he was writing. If one pulls at the threads of the current narrative

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[156] Alejandro Portes, 'Immigrant Theory for a New Century: Some Problems and Opportunities,' in Josh DeWind, Charles Hirschman and Philip Kasinitz (eds.) 'Immigrant Adaptation and Native-born Responses in the Making of the Americas,' a special issue of the *International Migration Review,* vol. XXX1, no. 4, (Winter, 1997), pp. 799-826.

[157] Anthropologists have been at the forefront of pushing out the boundaries of this interdisciplinary turn towards transnationalism. For example, one may think here of the work of Roger Rouse, see Roger Rouse, 'Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism' in Jonathan Xavier India and Renato Rosaldo (eds.) *The Anthropology of Globalisation: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 157-172. This trend has also run to excess: Nina Glick-Schiller all but labelled the current era in migration the age of the 'transmigrant', see Nina Glick-Schiller, Linda Brasch and Christina Blanc-Szanton (eds.), *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992). Several commentators, including Nina Glick-Schiller, have more recently noted that many of the features that were described as new obtained in historical contexts such as the Irish Diaspora in the 19th century.

it is possible to catch hold of the much more complex and ancient story of migration.[159]

The history of the Irish diaspora has important lessons to teach in this regard. We may certainly consider the ways in which migration can stretch a sense of identity beyond what would seem to be its natural fit. By way of example, in his celebrated primer, *The Irish Diaspora,* Donald Akenson provides an aerial view of Irish migration data. Occasionally he zooms-in to take a close-up of the everyday lives of the individuals and families that together constituted this vast, centuries-long flow of people. In one such scene we encounter the Quinn brothers, William and Patrick. Born into poverty in the Falls Road in Belfast, the two brothers inevitably felt the pull of migration. William arrived in New South Wales to take up mining in the 1880s, rose to the rank of manager, moved backwards and forwards from New Zealand to Australia and eventually settled into retirement in Auckland before the Great War as a man of considerable means. Patrick too could be described as a prospector, but of a very different ilk: he also settled in New Zealand to work as a bush man or gum digger but seemingly focused his energies more on achieving heroic status in the field of alcohol consumption. William found his brother an embarrassment, and neither sibling made much effort to keep in contact. In a letter home in 1895

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[158] Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 55.
[159] James Clifford, who has provided one of the most exemplary statements on diasporas, notes that work such as Janet Abu Lughod's *Before European Hegemony: The World System, 1250-1350 AD*, and Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* may be read as discussions of older forms of transnational connectivity. However, I suggest that, at the very least, one puts the 'national' in inverted commas and takes the hint that large-scale migration and movement are as traditional as rooted-ness to place is thought to be. See Janet Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, 1250-1350 AD* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta in association with Penguin, 1992). And, James Clifford, 'Diasporas' *Cultural Anthropology,* vol. 9, no. 3, (1994), pp. 302-338.

William concluded, with an air of boredom: 'If I hear of *his* death I will let you know.'[160] Patrick, for his part, was in no hurry either to expire or to become possessed by the spirit of capitalism. At ten shillings a week New Zealand had a very attractive social welfare system—in Ireland he would have received nothing. Thus, his well-to-do brother remained terminally embarrassed by his 'benefit tourist' sibling, and they both lived out their final years less than a day away from each other, communicating via news relayed second-hand from Ireland. As Akenson notes: 'They had travelled half way around the globe, only to be worlds apart.'[161] But the most interesting thing about the story of the chalk and cheese brothers is that despite their incorrigible natures they still managed the trick of transnational communication in the 19th century, and one doubts that they marvelled at their own sophistication in that regard.

What of the Irish in America, where the notion of assimilation received its most detailed attention and where 'the Irish' were but one of the ethnic groups to fall under the gaze of Chicago sociologists such as Robert Park? Despite the evidence that the majority of Irish-Americans are Protestant, popular perception has the post-Great Hunger migrants as the archetype, diving headlong into the melting pot with 'pestilence on their backs and famine in their stomachs'.[162] That assimilation research seemed to back-reference some sort of law of diminishing ethnicity was made possible in the work of its most accomplished authors by a cognisance of structural forces such as labour and social forces such

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[160] Donald Akenson. *The Irish Diaspora*, p. 74.

[161] *Ibid.*

[162] This description was used in connection to the Irish migrants to the United Kingdom. See Jim MacLaughlin, '"Pestilence on Their Backs, Famine in Their Stomachs:" The Racial Construction of Irishness and the Irish in Victorian Britain,' in Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (eds.) *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 50-77.

as 'race'.  But, neither the metaphor nor the theory held.  After the Great War, African-Americans left the South's declining cotton industry for cities like Chicago, and Robert Park's assimilation model, which had difficulty swallowing the Irish, suffered the kind of digestive problem that would have made D.P. Moran wince.  But to Park this was a simple issue and reflected the capacity of the United States to 'swallow and digest every sort of normal human difference, except the purely external ones, like the colour of the skin'.[163]  And Irish-Americans suffered even from the latter infirmity, as Noel Ignatiev reminds us.  A slave on a plantation, he notes, famously commented to an abolitionist: 'My master treats me terribly cruelly.  He treats me like a common Irishman.'[164]

So, is what we understand by 'transnationalism' that new after all?  In a recent essay comparing migration to New York today and at the turn of the 20th century, Nancy Foner has noted that a certain kind of amnesia has accompanied current discussions about 'transmigrants'.  The 1990 US Census suggested that 28% of New York's population were foreign born; in 1910 that figure was 41%—and in 1910 there was a lot of talk about the problems of 'new immigration'.[165]  Closer inspection reveals the existence of transnational households; return migration rates that were higher than today, and a seasonal movement of workers across the Atlantic, particularly from the Italian villages and towns in which the thoroughly mobile though somehow still 'traditional' locals cheerfully nicknamed the United States 'the workshop'.[166]  And, if one were to argue: but the Italians were white, and now it is 'race' that is structuring

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[163] Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Sciences of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 [1924]), pp. 757-758.
[164] See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, p. 36.
[165] Nancy Foner, '"What's new About Transnationalism?" New York Immigrants Today and at the Turn of the Century,' *Diaspora,* vol. 6, no. 3, (1997), pp. 355-375.

the bifocal space of transmigrants in New York, for example, then that would be

to ignore sociologist E.R. Ross's descriptions of 'the Italian dusk', which were

little removed from 19th century images of poor Irish *émigrés* as Negroes turned

inside out.

Transnationalism was widely conceived as new because globalisation was

so too imagined. But before we look historically and critically at the present and

shout, 'nothing new here', or stretch fashionable yet elusive terms too far back

into the past, we should note that measured commentators have recognised the

importance of the numbers involved today, the directions, the role of

communication, and the normative qualities.[167] A variety of commentators have

also noted that the literature on transnationalism is driven by data from case

studies that sample on the dependant variable. Thus, obsessions with new modes

of travel and communication, and with the 'intensity' they allow for, must be

tempered by a larger store of data—otherwise one runs the risk of descending

into technological chauvinism or of beating a drum for social practices that could

hardly be said to benefit everyone.

One of the persistent problems with transnationalism is its analytical

separation from other categories of migration. For example, work on

transnationalism seems to have paid little heed to the experiences of refugees,

many of whom practice quintessentially polycentric lives, yet often feel a heavier

hand from the nation-state (as do migrants in general).[168] Perhaps, then, it is

little coincidence that the terms transnational and diaspora seem to live together

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[166] *Ibid.,* p. 359.
[167] The challenge that transnationalism poses to the nation-state is perhaps the most fruitful point at which to examine its consequences, I would argue.

in a bitter marriage. The word diaspora comes from the Greek words διασποορα (dispersion), δια (through) and σπειρειυ (which means to sow or scatter). The notion of a scattering, then, goes to the very centre of what diaspora stands for. Historically, the Jewish diaspora represented the case study *par excellence*. Social scientists, however, have been slow indeed to embrace the concept and have been suspicious that this notion is simply being shoe-horned into explaining complex phenomena in order to reflect a radical critique of the nation-state; worse, it is understood to merely replay the essentialism of the nation but locate it elsewhere.[169]

Diaspora does, however, allow us to see certain populations not just as figures on the margins of a tradition or in-between traditions, but, rather, at the core of a diaspora tradition that transcends boundaries. Just as 'nation' conjures up ideas of place and dwelling, diaspora calls forth oppositions, travel and displacement, but yet hanging together somehow in what Stuart Hall calls an 'imagined coherence'.[170] Such imagined coherence may provide migrant populations with the possibility of partially living outside of a country like Ireland through memory, imagination or physical travel while, at the same time, making a life in the country. This may be a conscious choice or reflect a desire to live amongst those who you feel are most like you, while still maintaining yourself in one country—this may also be a terrible indictment of a country in

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[168] See Richard Black, 'Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy,' a special issue of the *International Migration Review*, the UNHCR at 50, vol. XXXV, no. 1, (Spring, 2001), pp. 57-79.

[169] See for example, André Levy, 'Diasporas Through Anthropological Lenses: Contexts of Postmodernity' *Diaspora,* vol. 9, no. 1, (2000), pp. 137-157.

[170] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-237 passim.

which being a member of a minority and living life as you wish is difficult if not impossible.[171]

Work has already begun on the question of whether the Vietnamese populations that have been residing overseas since the long Vietnam War can legitimately be described as a diaspora and on the question of what kind of machinery is present to imagine such a coherence. Celebrated Vietnamese Studies scholar Louis-Jacques Dorais recently sketched the outlines of the *Viet Kieu*—the more than 2.5 million Vietnamese men, women and children that fled the country since World War II—with particular reference to Canada.[172] The features of a success story are all here: an ethic of hard work and educational achievement, strong family values and support. The question Dorais was asking, though, was does this headlong charge towards the category of 'model minority' work against the notion of diaspora? The answer seems to be yes. One informant, a 24-year-old man from Montreal, noted:

> They [the Vietnamese] are hard-working, persevering, and close to their family, […] dependant, also, on their family [*and*] what is most important to them is, precisely, the family: ancestor worship, respecting elders. And formal education too.[173]

These words could have been recorded in the USA, Paris or Dublin; I have taped many comments such as this in formal interviews. To Dorais such a statement is taken to suggest that it is the family that is the important unit and not the diaspora.

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[171] In his essay, 'Diasporas', James Clifford recently drew together and critically evaluated a number of important works on the topic, to establish some criteria through which to frame research in this field. See James Clifford, 'Diasporas', pp. 302-338.
[172] Louis-Jacques Dorais, 'Defining the Overseas Vietnamese,' *Diaspora* vol. 10, no. 1 (2001), pp. 3-27.

Despite this, the mobilisation of family connections across *Viet Kieu* communities does bear a curious and unexpected family resemblance to the idea of diaspora. Many of the questions that Dorais has asked are those that I have or will ask here: can the Vietnamese-Irish be considered as part of a diaspora? Is such a notion alive for the first generation and a 'capacity' for the second-generation? By capacity, I mean the sense that the idea of a great overseas community may become meaningful, if at all, when called into action by specific behaviours within the frame of family.

**The Vietnamese-Irish as a Diaspora?**

In the previous chapter I illustrated, with the help of a diagram, what a typical example of a Vietnamese-Irish family might look like. In the case of the family described, the older generation are predominantly employed in the takeaway business, as are many of those children who were born in Vietnam. For the second-generation Vietnamese-Irish education towards technical skills, computing, science, etc. forms a distinct pattern, though not always with successful outcomes. What the diagram also illustrates is the corporate family network, which sits on top of households. A male-oriented patrilineal system that generates connectivity across family units, or *ho,* is in evidence, but so also is a bilateral system of households or *nha.* I noted a system of solidarity that moves beyond the walls of the house to create a sense of family reinforced by sentiment, often played out in businesses, and reified by religious belief. This family is also connected to other sets of relations as far away as Norway, Paris,

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[173] Louis-Jacques Dorais, 'Vietnamese Communities in Canada, France and Denmark,' *Journal of Refugee Studies* vol. 11 (1998), pp. 107-125.

and Houston, Texas, not to mention those relatives who remained in Vietnam.
As one older generation man jokingly remarked:

> I have family everywhere. I have family in America, and a brother in
> France and [*one*] in Denmark. And in Vietnam I have family. We all
> travel. Go to see family. When I travel I go to them. Sometimes they
> come to Ireland without telling me. I pretend I'm not in.

What's interesting about this mode of living is that in Ireland we are well placed
to understand it based on the historical data from the Irish diaspora. As far back
as the 1930s, Harvard anthropologist Conrad Arensberg noted how the space of
the Irish home was inscribed with connections to the dead and emigrated.
Beyond the hall door of his house, Arensberg noted, the countryman's world
stretched across the seas. In the case he was documenting, a small village in
1930s Clare, a good portion of the population was almost entirely subsidised by
absent members in the Shanghai Police.

There is a tendency among those who examine migration in the context of
the family, such as Arensberg, to suspect that something above and beyond the
people concerned was always on the verge of appearing: 'With the word [*blood*],
a social structure of interwoven habit patterns and emotional reciprocities gains a
mystical force, all the more compelling.'[174] Diaspora, the scattering of seed,
bears an uncanny resemblance to family, to the nation, and yet it disappears
before it comes into view. A diaspora is not just a series of families trying really
hard. But family may be a central resource for diasporic imaginings. For
Arensberg, however, the multi-national Irish family was only clan-*ish*: 'no fast

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[174] Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman: An Anthropological Study* (Prospect
Heights Illinois: Waveland Press Inc, 1988 [1937, 1968]), p. 84.

bounds and no rigidities; it is a system of potentialities', he argued.[175] The

Harvard functionalist would be later criticised by historians for locating a part of

the world that had apparently found the secret of eternal stability. In this regard,

Arensberg did the historians a favour by constantly making their point, 'balance,

pattern, system, structure ... the point around which the balance revolves is

marriage', he noted.[176] Yet there are two points in need of a retrial: that a social

form may be lived intensely here, while at the same time seem to belong

elsewhere; and, that all social forms and networks have nexus that, however

imprecisely, allow us to say something about cultural life.

Marriage for the Vietnamese-Irish is perhaps one such nexus, though few

of the younger generation with whom I have interacted with were intent on this at

this point in their lives. Another nexus involves the ways in which people raise

their children, and in a related sense how they identify themselves. Three

ethnographic portraits can be used to illustrate the complexities of identifying the

emergent patterns. The first is the story of Mrs Nguyen, a 69-year-old

businesswoman; the second story is that of Tan a 30-year-old translator with a

multinational company, and the final, fractured portrait is based on discussions

with Phuong, a young Vietnamese-Irish woman.

Mrs Nguyen was born in North Vietnam in 1935. In an interview

conducted with a simultaneous interpreter she recalled:

> My parents died when I was very young, and I don't really remember
> much about my childhood, the house I was born in, or the place. After
> my father died I got married. My husband was from the same town I was
> born in, and we knew the family. I had nine children. I was living in the
> countryside, so the war had no great impact on my family. Then the *Viet*

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[175] *Ibid.*

[176] *Ibid.*, pp. 76-7 passim.

*Minh* came to the village and my family ran because my husband was in the army. We went to Saigon where we could find work. ...
We came to Ireland in 1979. On the way, someone showed me Ireland on a map and I couldn't believe how small it looked. I tried to raise the children in an Irish way. They see themselves as Irish. All the children here are with Irish people, except for two. I don't see how making them learn the [*Vietnamese*] culture is important. My only friends are Vietnamese, and I don't have much to do with Irish people or understand them. I only say hello to Irish people. I haven't noticed much about Ireland: for me it's work, work, work! But, I try to go back to Vietnam as much as possible, every year. I have family in Vietnam.

This lengthy quotation suggests a number of themes, but let us take up just two of the most interesting ones. Firstly, it is obvious that Mrs Nguyen and her family have been on the move since the early part of the Vietnam War. To consider her words as simply a description of a Vietnamese person adapting to life in Ireland is to miss the complexity of her biography. Secondly, she points to a partially closed lifestyle in Ireland (her lack of English language skills has a significant role here) in which her social universe is well defined and limited thus. This latter theme suggests the very real way in which Vietnam maintains itself on her meaningful horizon as an alternate and proximate social world. The next portrait elucidates many of these same points even further.

**Figure 18: 'Diasporic Spaces – A Market in Vietnam'**



(Courtesy of Nguyen Family)

**Figure 19: 'Diasporic Spaces – Vietnamese-Irish Office'**
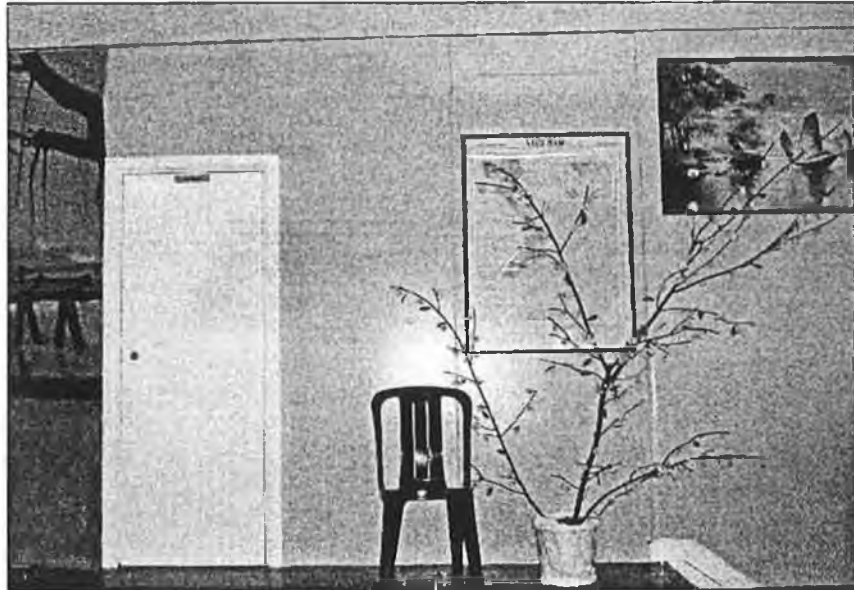


(Courtesy of Nguyen Family)

**Figure 20: 'Diasporic Spaces – Vietnamese-Irish Centre'**



(Photograph by Thai Van Nga)

Tan is 30 years old and was one of the children that arrived in Ireland in 1979. His trip to Ireland came after a dramatic escape from Thai pirates and months on an island refugee camp in Malaysia. Though now a successful

professional translator, he recalled painful times growing up in Ireland and seeking out an education and work. His choice of work was decided by opportunity, support from a kind religious worker and a good measure of personal ambition. Tan recognised early on the difficulties in working in a takeaway business: the unsociable hours and problems in maintaining friendships, the casual abuse (in the early years it was all too common for takeaway vans to be burned by protection rackets or simply tipped over by gangs of drunken customers) and the relatively poor wages. His experience as a translator overseas also kept him in touch with the wider expatriate community, the *Viet Kieu*:

> I personally contact a lot of people around the world, people in England and people in America. I use the Internet, and listen into the radio that way. People that I listen to share a lot, and many go back to Vietnam. There is also satellite television that the Vietnamese government puts out. A lot of my friends watch this, and we can see that Vietnam is trying to attract people to visit—but this is only one side of the story: the good side. If you go back there you will see that it is different for the poorer people. Only rich people are members of the Communist Party!

In Ireland he found that this sense that 'we' are a displaced overseas community was stronger than in the UK or America. The Vietnamese-Irish travelled home more often, he noted, but he couldn't say whether political convictions or the limited involvement in wider Irish society was responsible— but he leaned towards the latter, interestingly.

Tan has been back to Vietnam repeatedly and has noted a new source of dislocation: the feeling of being a stranger in your own country, with his own country being conceived of as Vietnam:

> Once you enter Vietnam of course you go to … the village where you are from. You have to register with the local authorities there, if you stay for

a period of time. If you stay in a hotel you register there. So even if you haven't done anything wrong you still feel unsafe. Ok, maybe that's their regulations and I don't criticise them for that, but you still feel unsafe having no passport.

You have different reactions from the local people there. The way you speak Vietnamese is out of tune, and they recognise you easily. You look as normal as them but they still recognise you as a foreigner: a bridge to a Western country. They have a way of seeing you no matter how hard you try to be a local. My family, the way they look at me, maybe it has been a long time … but when you go back there you do get a warm welcome. But you have to be fairly sensitive. Everybody here has a mattress, but there they may not, and they may borrow one when you come to visit because they think that it is what you expect—they might go out and buy a mattress for you, but it is quite hot there and you don't really want a mattress!

…

Would I go to live there? That is a difficult question. Some member of your family, for example, might be able to help you, to bring you in. They might know someone that might be able to help you. If you don't have a network … and probably you could say that if the network doesn't work. … Well, that's the way the system works: if you know people it helps. … Vietnamese families are like networks …

Therefore, for Tan and for Mrs Nguyen the notion of 'diaspora', if reflected on at all, is certainly understood differently. For both individuals Vietnam looms large on their horizon. Mrs Nguyen only says hello to Irish people and inhabits what one may describe as a diasporic space, if that notion is to have any meaning. Throughout his life Tan has played out his identity of various sides of the hyphen between Vietnamese and Irish. He is unsatisfied with his limited involvement in wider Irish society and continues to engage in the political life of his 'home', while not being entirely comfortable in Vietnam either.

What of the second-generation Vietnamese-Irish? When I first met her, Phuong was 25 and unemployed despite a good degree and prosperous background. Though she is single, she says she is looking for 'a cute Irish guy'. Her family were forced to flee Vietnam in 1978, and her older sister, who was

expected to join them in a dockland area, never arrived and was never seen again. When sitting in her living room one day Phuong talked about the ancestral shrine in the corner. When she marries the 'cute Irish guy' her home would not have one. Yet she would remain in a Vietnamese family and connect her family to it. At least that's the impression she gave me. It was difficult for her to describe a future that seemed to be off the map, so to speak. At that point in time her major concern was whether she would be able to secure professional work or be forced to continue working in the family's takeaway business. Was Phuong increasingly shadowed by a future of sectional ethnicity, and if a more complex story was to be told what role would family, work, home life and diasporic imaginings play?

There has been a marked tendency to look at immigrant populations around the world through the lens of family; yet, the frame of family as home life does not seem in any way inappropriate to research into the Vietnamese-Irish. Households are marked off as different by the presence of ancestral shrines, kitchen altars, collections of family photographs celebrating educational successes and religious iconography. Such spatial culture is a concrete, if problematic, reflection of notions of family and home located in the way Vietnamese-Irish persons see their identity. In the case of Mrs Nguyen and in the case of Phuong such family and home life is a style worn differently. For the elder woman Ireland is a relatively unattended presence in the way she lives her everyday life. Indeed, her everyday life stands in mocking contrast to the notion of intercultural dialogue and the *multi-inter-cultural-racial-integration-speak* that dominates a variety of state-inspired committees and action groups in Ireland. Mrs Nguyen's synopsised life history tells a story of hardship and

dislocation. Now in Ireland for 25 years, she has located herself as Irish with difference. While she is a ghostly presence within the nation-state she also inhabits it in a way that exposed the limits of the current configuration of nation-state power while enshrining a version of Irishness.

We must think of the nation-state as an old building that locks itself to many people. For those that are allowed inside, there are different people inhabiting different parts, and there are many entrances to rooms and many exits. Just like a stately home, for example, it is possible for some people to live and work in the same place yet move through a different set of spatial paths, without their lives ever intersecting much. Mrs Nguyen's own home is an extension of her takeaway business and work is planned and carried out there. From there she goes to work, visits family, perhaps goes to the community centre where films are sometimes played of the old country; the *Tết* celebrations bring old friends together, and as often as possible she flies back to Vietnam. But this is not a negative, sectioned off lifestyle in her mind. She constantly emphasises how grateful she is to the 'Irish', for helping her, and for enabling her to have her own business and raise her family. Ultimately, the multinational character of her family and her desire to visit the graves of her ancestors in Vietnam raises her identity from the local and sends it abroad. Yet she raised her children to be Irish. The question is whether they will cease to engage with the Vietnamese side of the hyphen?

Phuong's good degree and prosperous background have granted her a licence for a few years. Her half-joking search for a cute Irish guy was always under the eye of the clock. Her inability to secure work on graduation was as much to do with psychological factors as to the economy or discrimination. Her

father, a small, thin man with a bit of a temper had pushed her towards

educational achievement, constantly demanding rather odd study strategies: she

recalled as a child having her homework done quickly and well one evening and

being challenged for laziness. She assured her father that it was done, but in a fit

of anger and misunderstanding he stood over her and made her do it twice. It

had been his suggestion that she study computing at university. Though she did

well in her studies, she assured me that she had simply no idea what she wanted

to do with her life. The idea that she would spend her life as a software tester,

for example, made her 'feel sick'. Yet, she secured employment, but the post-

2000 technology sector slump meant that she was soon searching for work again.

There were no recriminations in her family. It was widely known that things

were not good in that sector, and even this small community felt it.

When I first met Phuong she was dreading the prospect of extending her

part-time work in the family business in to a full-time job. She even considered

the compromise solution of opening her own takeaway in the full knowledge that

this would be to draw a line under her education and career aspirations. She

would make money but work long hours at strange times—she could kiss the

cute Irish guy goodbye. When I met her again some months later, she was

considering emigration to Texas, where she had been as a child on several trips.

She showed me home videos in which the camera pointed out the windows of a

car towards a large restaurant. The camera moved and focused like the father-of-

the-bride in an arranged marriage: lingering on material objects in the house, on

cars, technology in the restaurant's kitchen, numbers of customers. In the West

of Ireland there was a practice known as 'walking the land', during which

potential in-laws surveyed the holdings of the marriage partner's family, and this seemed the visual equivalent of such an audit.

**VideoLives**

Home videos are an interesting medium through which to think about Vietnamese-Irish identity. Of course, they are not the only technologies that enable identity to be communicated. One might similarly think about satellite TV, the Internet, DVDs memorialising South Vietnam and the great exodus, karaoke videos, all of which play an important role. But videos are something that I found particularly striking. Over the years of conducting ethnographic research I was shown many, and have taken away and studied many more. One family in particular had many dozens spanning over a decade. While people seemed—curiously I thought—more comfortable sharing these than answering face-to-face questions, it would still be wholly inappropriate to discuss the intimate aspects of such tapes in detail. Nonetheless, some broad categories and styles are illustrative. For example, a prominent category of home video is the narrative of return. These videos are usually kept to record the first trip an individual or family makes back to Vietnam, though subsequent trips are also recorded. Often the ancestors' graves are the focus of much of the footage, together with hometowns and communal activities—the camera drifts over activities rather than confessing statements.

One's first impression is that the solemnity of ancestor worship is the structural reason for the *obscura* style of the video, where the eye is invisible to those going about their business, praying, cleaning or making offerings. Occasionally, the camera moves past others making videotapes, who are also

silent and at the margins of whatever activity is taking place. One sees oneself sometimes watching someone else videoing someone else, who in turn is videoing some people you don't know—such home movies are as vertigo inducing as Samuel Beckett's *Film*.

**Figure 21: 'Narrative of Return'**



(Photograph by Thai Van Nga)

**Figure 22: 'Narratives of Return – 2 Photographs of Ancestor Worship'**

(Courtesy of a Vietnamese-Irish Family)

The style persists in the type of home movie that Phuong showed me, the 'audit video'. Vietnamese-Irish people, through the ordinary processes of recording and memorialising their lives, leave cultural objects like videos that may be used in a transnational manner.

**Figure 23: 'Audit Video'**



(Courtesy of a Vietnamese-Irish Family)

Relatives pass on videos of their lives to others who live overseas. Such tapes look at restaurants, businesses, cars and other consumer objects in great detail. When watching a video of a Vietnamese-Irish family on a trip to visit the home of relatives in Australia, for example, one might be forgiven for thinking that an auctioneer is wielding the camera. But there is a ceremonial aspect also: for those who cannot travel, home videos bring them in touch with the wider family. Again the style is interesting. Before a celebration begins, such as a birthday, food is laid out, banquet style on a table. Video cameras consume the image of the food before the guests consume the 'real' food, giving those who watch the tape a sense of being there as invited guests and participants. Videos then demonstrate a hugely important feature of the world in which Vietnamese-Irish people live. Something so extraordinary as transnationalism or the idea of a diaspora is in fact a part of everyday life. Just as letters home once allowed the army of emigrants that together comprised the Irish diaspora to pass on information and to share lives separated by thousands of miles, so also do Vietnamese-Irish home videos facilitate and reflect the compressed space of people for whom the borders of the nation-state do not check everyday life or the imagination.[177]

When reflecting back on the brief ethnographic portraits of Vietnamese-Irish lives, and on the variable presence of the past and far away in those lives, a

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[177] Research on the Irish diaspora through the medium of letters home has found its most important expression in the exquisite work of David Fitzpatrick. One is struck when reading *Oceans of Consolation* predominantly by the lack of misty-eyed keening for Ireland. Letters home instead provide almost encyclopaedic information on regions, ranging from benefit entitlements to the price of sheep and, occasionally, racial 'types'. See David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork: Cork: Cork University Press, 1994).

clear break must be made with the common sense view of hyphenated identities.

I have argued that the notion of assimilation within the nation-state is far too

blunt; one could also argue that the pendulum swing towards diaspora and

transnationalism offers a less than substantial alternative. Discussing betwixt

and between lives of Vietnamese-Americans, Patricia Fernández-Kelly recently

remarked that, 'the Vietnamese continue to be in, but not of, the United

States.'[178] The aspect of people's lives that is in the United States is examined

for signs of assimilation; the part that remains outside is taken as evidence of

diaspora. That what we are dealing with is neither and both should be no

surprise, and home videos articulate precisely this. In order to go deeper into

people's lives it is interesting to reflect on how home may be the space that links

the transnational to the local, and this again references notions of tradition,

culture and change.

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[178] Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Richard Schauffler, 'Divided Fates: Immigrant
Children in a Re-structured US Economy,' International Migration Review, vol. XXVII,
no. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 662-690, especially p. 667.

**Chapter 4: At Home with the Dead: A Window into Vietnamese-Irish Lives**

The cultural critic Roland Barthes tells an interesting story about Guy de Maupassant. Apparently the great writer often ate lunch in the restaurant in the Eiffel Tower despite not really liking the food there. When questioned on his habit he would reply: 'It's the only place in Paris where I don't have to see it.'[179] Maupassant drew attention to the fact that the cultural significance of architecture and public spaces is often thought of in privileged ways, and only in the past few decades has there been a noticeable turn towards looking at marginal zones and at how people make spaces meaningful and intimate. This is an enormously important issue when it comes to migrant populations. One may think in terms of how different minorities write culture and values on a city, or one may consider issues that range from discrimination to ethnic boundaries.[180] The Vietnamese-Irish have no great visibility in public culture but that does not mean that their lives are not spatial, be it in their homes, community buildings or places of business. Care is needed, therefore, in case we privilege what one may see over what may be hidden from view—one should recall Franz Fanon's quip that public architecture and space are 'things that fascinate people that have nothing to do'.[181]

What concerns me here is to stake out a description of some of the meaningful places in Vietnamese-Irish lives and to suggest how their cultural

[179] Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies,* trans. Richard Howard (California: University of California Press, 1997), p. 36.
[180] For example see Elisa Joy White, 'Forging African Diaspora Places in Dublin's Retro-global Spaces: Minority Making in a New Global City,' Rewriting the City: Encounters with the Global Irish City, a special issue of *CITY: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, (eds.) Mark Maguire, Paul Hollywood and Bob Catherall, vol. 6, no. 2, (2002), pp. 34-49.

inscriptions may help further illuminate their position in society. Vietnamese-Irish homes are useful starting points from which to begin a journey to study such issues as belief, family life and identity. For example, when sitting in the home of a young Vietnamese-Irish woman one day I asked her about the difference between her parents' lives and how she might see her own patterning out. She noted that her family didn't mind her going out with young men who were not 'Vietnamese' and that they were similarly open to the prospect of marriage with such a partner. We talked for a while about her values when it came to relationships. This topic seemed to provoke in her a broader reflection, and she concluded: 'I'm Irish. I was born in Vietnam, but I'm Irish. My friends are Irish. … Except with my family, then I'm kind of Vietnamese.' 'So you're Vietnamese at home?' I asked. Her face lit up as if by accident we had stumbled on the key to it all. 'Yes, yes', she said, 'inside it is Vietnamese food, and outside it's McDonalds'. The simple statement could be unpacked in a number of ways, and here I would like to consider the ways in which Vietnamese-Irish people's homes may be thought of as something above and beyond the stage upon which their lives are played out. By this I mean that, at the very least, homes and home life may, to borrow a phrase from Claude Lévi-Strauss, be good to think.

As this thesis has already illustrated, the Vietnamese-Irish are a population spread out across Greater Dublin and some smaller towns. They are bound together through identity and family networks. If one were to ask a Vietnamese-Irish person to sketch a profile of the average family he or she would suggest that it would probably include several homes in Dublin housing estates, which are not necessarily proximate to one another. He or she would also

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[181] Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles Markmann (London: Pluto

suggest that the family would likely be sustained by one or two takeaway

businesses, close-knit and with an ethos of educational achievement and hard

work.[182] If pressed further, a Vietnamese-Irish person might add that families

tend to live in homes that are standard on the outside and different on the inside.

In this regard, it took no more than the first four or five qualitative house calls

before I became used to what one could expect from a Vietnamese-Irish house.

Firstly, the shoes left neatly at the door. In some cases there is a Buddha; in the

majority of cases the houses are spotless and have professionally-taken

photographs of family occasions and education achievements on the walls. In all

cases the living rooms heave with the latest big-screen TVs, DVD players and

stereos. As if to counter balance the technology, in either the kitchen, the living

room or in both there is usually an altar of variable size and visibility. In the

living room of the young woman with whom I discussed relationships and values

the altar was enormous. It stretched from the floor to the ceiling and held an

amazing variety of deities, demons and photographs of dead people.[183]

Ancestral shrines in the home appear different and mysterious to those

unfamiliar with them. For the student of Vietnamese culture they are a

remarkable talking point, exciting just as much conversation as a television with

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Classic, 1986), p. 19.

[182] As John-Paul Satre noted, stereotypes are often over-determined from the inside. See
John-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York, Schocken, 1948), p. 95.

[183] Of course, death is not just present in objects that appear to be old; an ancestral shrine
can be more of this world than modern technology. Jean Baudrillard furthers this line of
thinking when he comments on the typical American home: 'All dwellings have
something of the grave about them, but here the fake serenity is complete. The
unspeakable house plants, lurking everywhere … the picture windows looking lake
Snow White's glass coffin, the clumps of pale, dwarf flowers stretched out in patches
like sclerosis, the proliferation of technical gadgetry inside the house, beneath it, around
it, like drips in an intensive care ward, the TV, stereo and video which provide
communication with the beyond.' See Jean Baudrillard, 'America,' in Neil Leach (ed.)
*Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London and New York:
Rutledge, 1997), pp. 218-227.

a 51-inch screen. The bleached old photographs of Vietnamese past form the foundation posts around which a cultural history may be built. Again space is key. Ancestral altars are obviously 'different', but the presence of up-to-date technology and photographs of a family's educational achievements are just as Vietnamese. Inside the house is an island of Vietnamese-ness stitched through with conspicuous consumer objects.

**Figure 24: 'A Shrine to the Kitchen God, or Spirit of the Kitchen'**



(Photograph by Thai Van Nga)

It is precisely the presence of these seemingly antagonistic objects in one room that is interesting. If the word culture is to have any value then that value must be realised in the way one thinks about how the social mind and the world conforms, and cultural analysis must begin by questioning how people order their lives and give significance to the objects in their worlds. To answer such

questions one might begin by making the familiar strange and start in County Clare in the West of Ireland.

Anthropology has a fairly long history in Ireland. Flann O'Brien once quipped that the average Irish family consisted of a mother, father, eight or nine children and an anthropologist. At the same time, in the 1950s, the central character of Honor Tracy's *The Straight and Narrow Path* was an anthropologist who travelled to Ireland to recuperate from a mental breakdown induced by years of fieldwork in the Congo, where the natives repeatedly tried to poison him.[184] Her acidic irony was later matched by the angry locals who recognised themselves in Nancy Scheper-Hughes's *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics*. They reminded her of an often forgotten rule-of-thumb in research: people have a 'right not to be analysed'.[185] But the most influential text in the canon continues to be Conrad Arensberg's *The Irish Countryman*, which, with his later work, *Family and Community*, with Solon Kimball, has had an impressive impact on cultural analysis in Ireland. It has also come in for a lot of criticism. In some ways Arensberg's triumph was to ethnographically approximate a sunny childhood memory while writing about deeply serious issues that ranged from emigration to celibacy. In this, one can hardly accuse him of outright romanticism: he described celibate, bachelor farmers who clung to the land rather that pass it on to the younger generation in such a way that one was left with the

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[184] Honor Tracy's anthropologist/hero witnesses naked nuns jumping over a fire in a fertility rite, which he later compared to evidence in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in a *Times* article. Controversy erupts, and the text follows a man devoted to reason as he slowly unravels in a land devoted to gentle unreason. See Honor Tracy, *The Straight and Narrow Path*, 1956.

[185] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland*, 20th anniversary edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003), p. xvi. See also Michael Viney, 'The Yank in the Corner: Why the Ethnics of Anthropology are a Worry for Rural Ireland,' *The Irish Times*, 6 August 1983, p. 13.

impression that here were people caught in a discursive web of their own

design—between categories, like zombies, they resembled respectable social

beings yet their continued presence was a threat to the proper order of things.

Many criticisms of Arensberg, as hopelessly romantic and in love with stability,

have been heavy-handed, while other criticisms of his work have been more or

less accurate. For example, some commentators have suggested that what he was

describing as timeless social practices were in fact quite recent, such as patterns

of land tenure and domesticity.[186] Yet some of the more catholic themes he

raised are still worthy of attention. The anthropologist was writing about how

people render coherent the world in which they live. While writing on this theme

he touched on the spaces of people's homes and on how they practice the

ordering of belief and memory in everyday life. Take his celebrated description

of the west room:

> At my host's the [*west*] room was a sort of parlour into which
> none but distinguished guests were admitted. In it were kept pictures of
> the dead and emigrated members of the family, all 'fine' pieces of
> furniture, symbolic brass objects brought in by the bride at marriage; the
> sacramentals used when mass was celebrated in the house, in fact all
> religious objects, crucifixes, and so forth, except the 'blessed lamp' and a
> 'holy picture' in the kitchen. Nor were my hosts alone in keeping objects
> of sentimental and religious value in this special room. Other houses did
> likewise. The general feeling was that such objects 'belonged' there.[187]

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[186] As I have noted, tradition is invention in disguise. In a country such as Vietnam,
where culture comes with a capital 'C', one gets a powerful impression that traditions
are rooted and timeless, yet historical analysis reveals flux and routes through other
cultures. This was also the case in the Ireland Arensberg studied. He never persistently
denied cultural change; rather, his concern was expressed forcefully on more than one
occasion: 'Time and change are inevitable in human affairs; only an orderly social
mechanism can tame their ravages.' This concern with how people wrench a sense of
stability out of an ever-changing world was always going to confuse some of his readers:
'I am sure I shall be accused of a thorough-going, even mystical determinism in human
affairs.' See Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman,* pp. 82, and 142 respectively.
[187] *Ibid.,* p. 39.

The west room, for Arensberg, had both a mundane and a supernatural cast. It figured in marriage; out-houses, sheds or other buildings were never erected in its line of vision; traditionally the west was the land of the dead, and between the various realms were the elderly. Theoretically having relinquished active day-to-day running of the farm, the old couple retired to the west room and cast their shadow over it while being shadowed by it. The old people in the west room were 'going down with the sun'.[188] For Arensberg this home space required a full appreciation of culture in order to interpret the particular details, because the west room both made concrete and represented a system of values—here there existed something between the people and the room that was above and beyond both. Through photographs of the dead and far away the family encountered itself as an entity and got a sense of its own importance. In *Family and Community* he noted that in most west rooms there was a '... Sacred Heart picture before which the family prays the 'Family Rosary' at night'.[189]

Arensberg privileged continuity, stability and systems over the list opposing these terms. As Lawrence Taylor has noted, Frank O'Connor's novel *Dutch Interior* acts as an interesting counterpoint:

> The lamp was lowered, the fire covered, the clocks ticked loudly and he sweated profusely as he untied his laces; and for some reason the dim, airless kitchen, its walls crowded with pictures, the noisy clocks, the ornaments, the bolted doors, his mother's whispers, all combined to give him the feeling that he had been shut off from life and was being physically suffocated, and it seemed to him that murderers must feel like this before they were driven to a crime; a claustrophobia which only violence could shatter.[190]

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[188] *Ibid.*, p.184.
[189] Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968 [1940]), p. 128.
[190] Quoted in Lawrence J. Taylor, 'Re-entering the West Room: On the Power of Domestic Spaces,' in Donna Birdwell-Pheasant and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (eds.)

O'Connor's ability to draw our attention to the emotional dark side of home is impressive. But the image of the domestic space described is a product as much of the Victorian world as anything that could be described as Irish culture, as Taylor importantly notes. This is an important point when it comes to thinking about Vietnamese-Irish home life. One must preface one's arguments with the realisation that home, as an idea, has been put in packages and sold to people for well over a century now, and what one may think of as intimate and personal may in fact be a part of a larger history of domestic space.

For Vietnamese-Irish people their home life may stand as a concept freed from its specific referent. They discuss home not simply to talk about where they live but also to talk in the abstract, about life, identity and beliefs. Therefore, one might argue that an idea of home comes to rest on a particular place and interact with and be shaped by that place while remaining potentially free of it. Gilles Deleuze noticed this when he talked about 'a human technology, which exists before a material technology'.[191] His argument was that between the concrete world and the people who inhabit it with their words and thoughts there exists a diagram of forces and relationships—the proper object of social analysis. This is important both theoretically and practically.[192] Elizabeth Bowen's history of her world in *Bowen's Court* described what 'runs on most through a family living in one place' as a 'continuous, semi-physical

*House Life: Space, Place and Family in Europe* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), pp. 223-239

[191] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 39.

[192] For an essay on 'home' and belonging in the context of migration see Karen Fog Olwig, 'Travelling Makes a Home: Mobility and Identity Among West Indians,' in Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey (eds.), *Ideal Homes? Social Change and Domestic Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 73-84.

dream', and her home was thick with memories and imagination. Hers was a profound attachment to place. Some do not assign authenticity to Bowen's 'non-Irish' memories; while for others getting a dramatic sense of place from a three-bedroom, semi-detached house in West Dublin will be equally difficult to swallow, particularly as a Vietnamese-Irish home. [193]

The problem in thinking about Vietnamese-Irish homes revolves around notions of authenticity and depth. Bowen asked: can a family that have been in one place for only 300 years belong? And what about a family that have only been in one place for 5 years? Are we comparing like with like? One might assume that memories will find more nooks and crannies to hide in the longer people are in one place, but do people really belong to building materials? Vietnamese-Irish people tend to remember their homes in Vietnam but not necessarily their houses. Commenting on her desire to see Vietnam again shortly, one elderly Vietnamese-Irish woman commented: 'All my children live in Ireland and I see it as home. But I miss country life and my parents when I think back. I miss the graves of my parents.' In her memories, like in the memories of others, it is the play that is fore-grounded over the stage. Also, as noted above, migration is an impressive feature of Vietnamese-Irish family histories, and one may not safely assume that memories of home denote a fixed spot on the landscape. As Gaston Bachelard argued in *The Poetics of Space,*

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[193] Roy Foster noted that in the 1993 the editor of the *North Cork Anthology* included the name of Elizabeth Bowen in the contents page with a line drawn through it because, 'She was English. ... [*And*] we include her in this anthology, in deleted form, in order to explain why she does not belong to it.' R.F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (London, Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 2001), p. 148.

'The old saying: "We bring our *lares* with us" has many variations.'[194] The mechanism through which this is realised is somewhere in the matrix of cultural forces found in Vietnamese-Irish homes, the most outstanding of which is ancestor worship. I will briefly discuss this practice as it works into the weave of family, identity and home life. My sense is that ancestor worship may be a good way through which to think about why seemingly antagonistic material culture in Vietnamese-Irish homes is in fact not that antagonistic at all.

**Wandering Souls**

Ancestors live in most Vietnamese-Irish homes. Being without irony, they particularly favour living rooms. The houses in which altars to ancestors are most obviously on display are normally those of senior males within large family networks. The eldest male in a family, in the direct line of descent from the focal ancestor, is also expected to be a ritual head (*tộc trưởng*) responsible for the upkeep of graves, the lineage property (should such property exist), genealogies and is responsible for acting as an arbitrator in disputes amongst family members. From the centre the system spreads out to less senior heads of family units and their households. This is an idealistic description, however, and the contingencies of history, migration and the everyday life make rigidity difficult if not impossible.

Ancestor worship is difficult to define. It runs inside the male-oriented kinship system of the corporate family network or *Ho*.[195] While it is quasi-

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[194] Gaston Bachelard, 'The Poetics of Space', in Neil Leach (ed.) *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Rutledge, 1997), p. 87.
[195] This should not be taken to suggest that this system runs counter to the bilateral kinship centred on households or *nha*.

religious, it does not seem to antagonise other religious beliefs such as

Buddhism, and even Catholicism has found a formula for peaceful co-existence

with Vietnamese ancestors. According to one Vietnamese-Irish man:

> In here in Ireland my family are Catholics, so we don't make offerings at
> an altar, but we Vietnamese people have great loyalty to our families. So
> even if you are a Catholic, or not, or you ancestor worship, you will have
> an altar to you ancestor – but as a Catholic you don't make offerings in
> the ancestor's altar. The head of the families is my father. When my
> grandparents die my father will have to make an altar for the next
> generations. When my father passes away I will put up an altar, well I
> might ...

**Figure 25: 'Ancestors' Altars'**

(Photographs by Thai Van Nga)

In the example of the first of the above photographs, one may see the ancestors' altar being reconciled with Buddhism. Flexibility is a defining feature. And one could argue that flexibility is an outstanding characteristic of much Southeast Asian religious practices. In the 1950s, for example, Graham Green provided readers with this description of South Vietnam's Cao Dai religious/military sect, which was then somewhat *à la mode*:

> Saint Victor Hugo in the Uniform of the French Academy with a halo around his tricorn that pointed at some noble sentiment Sun Yat Sen was inscribing on a tablet. … There was nowhere to sit except in the Papal chair, round which a plaster cobra coiled, the marble floor glittered like water and there was no glass in the windows. We make a cage for air with holes, I thought, and man makes a cage for his religion in much the same way – with doubts left open to the weather and creeds opening on innumerable interpretations. [196]

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[196] Graham Green, *The Quiet American*, pp. 81-91 passim.

As the author walked through a 'Walt Disney fantasia of the East', where Christ, Buddha and Confucius shared divinity, and an ornate and precise senselessness obtained, and he asked: 'If this cathedral had existed for five centuries instead of two decades, would it have gathered a kind of convincingness with the scratches of feet and the erosion of weather?'[197]  Yet, for all this, ancestor worship, like nationalism, has the capacity to provoke visceral feelings rather than philosophical crises.  The history of the Vietnam War may be mined for some revealing moments.  For example, in 1966 the War was dominated by the so-called Buddhist Crisis in which the South Vietnamese Army (GVN) lined up against the dissident pagodas led by Tri Quang and his followers, who were often given to self-immolation.  On June 8 the GNV invaded the last remaining stronghold of resistance, the ancient imperial capital, *Hué*.  The mode of resistance offered by the defenceless citizens was extraordinary. They placed their ancestors' altars on the streets, defying the government soldiers to destroy the very fabric of society.  Though there was violence over a month-long period, much bloodshed was avoided.  Therefore, the question we must ask of ancestor worship is not related to its authenticity but rather to its power and its conformity with the lives of those who practice it, because that is where its power resides.

A detailed discussion of the rules for ancestor worship can prove quite difficult.  It is a system of beliefs that is both bafflingly complex and yet is deeply ambiguous.  According to the anthropologist Hy Van Luong, for example, in the Vietnamese belief system souls are of two different categories.  Firstly, there are *hon* (three of which reside in any human being) and, secondly, there are

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[197] *Ibid.*

*phach* or *via* (of which there are seven in males and nine in females).[198] Such

categories are believed to be precisely analogous to the forces in the universe; yet

neither the practitioners nor the ancestors themselves seem overly concerned

with 'ideal' precision. Where exactly each soul goes after death is not clear, and

ambiguity characterises many behavioural rules. This is not confined to overseas

Vietnamese populations and their offspring. In his study of analogous

Malaysian-Chinese beliefs Ian Clarke noted how responses to his research

questions frequently seemed to exasperate: 'I don't really think about it, I just do

it,' noted one young man.[199] Therefore, it would seem far more appropriate to

sketch the meaning and importance of ancestor worship through the eyes and

words of Vietnamese-Irish people in terms of how it makes sense in their own

lives and, along the way, suggest the broader implications. Before this, however,

a rough outline must be drawn.

If one looks at the photograph in Figure 25, above, one may observe 4

levels on this relatively typical altar. On the bottom level are a series of statues

to what one may describe as minor deities. This level is often associated with

children, and such minor deities are associated with youth, education and life

lessons. Sometimes young girls wear effigies of these or more significant deities

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[198] See Hy Van Luong, ''Brother' and 'Uncle': An Analysis of Rules, Structural Contradictions, and Meaning in Vietnamese Kinship,' *American Anthropologist,* vol. 86 (1984), pp. 290-315. Gerald Cannon Hickey, with extreme precision, tracks down the details further. According to Hickey, the nine *via* have no particular properties, and if all souls and spirits are not present then insanity, sickness or death may result. If no ancestor worship occurs after death the deceased will become a wandering spirit, antagonistic to the living. But, becoming wandering souls may also be the fate of those who die far from home. Curiously, this may not reinforce the notion of home as a spot on a particular landscape but rather solidify ancestor worship as a practice of making home where the practice takes place. See Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam,* p. 76; and, Mark W. McLeod and Nguyen Thi Dieu, *Culture and Customs of Vietnam,* p. 45.

as amulets on necklaces—indeed this is one of the interesting ways in which a 'traditional' cultural practice may be rendered as contemporary and 'cool'. The second level is where, in this case, photographs of ancestors from both sides of the marriage unit are to be found and revered, while further up the shrine are the important deities and images of Buddha. Of course, in and of itself, the altar is not meaningful; rather, the people the ancestors' altar extends from breath life into it. As family members grow older they interact with the altar differently— they grow up with it. But the altar itself is not simply a fixed set of objects: the altar changes as old photographs are removed and replaced with images of more up-to-date ancestors. Not unlike a Stalin-era political photograph, the ancestors' altar only appears to be frozen in time. This has not gone unnoticed by cultural commentators working in diverse locations and times, from ancient Rome to modern China and Northern Ghana.[200] In the practice of ancestor worship among the Nankanse of Africa, for example, there can be only one 'father of the family', and it is defined as much by conflict as it is by serenity. In R.S. Rattray's celebrated description of Nankanse ancestor worship he noted: 'Parents do not like their first-born and it is unlucky to live with them. I think the idea is that they are waiting, as we would say, 'to step into the dead man's shoes'.'[201]

The family and the dead interact most obviously on the annual death anniversary or *ngày giỗ* of an ancestor. Relatives are phoned well in advance.

[199] Ian Clarke, 'Ancestor Worship and Identity: Ritual Interpretation and Social Normalisation in the Malaysian Chinese Community,' *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia,* vol. 15, no. 2 (2000), p. 279.
[200] For a discussion of Chinese ancestor worship, which is relatively similar to Vietnamese practices, see Maurice Freedman, 'Ritual Aspects of Chinese Kinship and Marriage,' in Maurice Freedman (ed.), *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1970), pp. 163-189.
[201] R.S. Rattray, *Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 263.

Depending on whose anniversary it is, it will be either the head of the family (*tộc trưởng*) or a younger brother, together with household head, that carries out such duties. This, of course, also depends on where the various protagonists reside. A few days before the *giỗ* the altar is cleaned and the house made presentable, and on the afternoon before the *giỗ* flowers, fresh fruit and candles are made ready. It was considered 'traditional' for close kin to gather to hear the life history of the ancestor before the anniversary. It is not really feasible for Vietnamese-Irish people to give up work and their other commitments over and above one afternoon or early evening, however. At this stage a pre-*giỗ* ceremony commonly involves the lighting of joss sticks and candles on the altar, together with the offering of a tray or plate of food—this is called *lễ tiên thương* or 'a foretaste'. Joss sticks are normally then shaken while the soul of the ancestor, embodied in a photograph, is approached by the family one at a time, including by children.

During the actual death anniversary roughly the same process is followed except that this time the ancestor is invited home for a family reunion, as family members ritualistically bow down before the altar. With the ancestor present an elaborate meal is consumed. Interestingly, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the ancestor is not the only absent presence in the here and now. Through the lenses of home video cameras proximity collapses and the far away members of the extended family virtually consume the meal with their kindred. Just as the dead join the feast in their own way, for those members of the extended Vietnamese-Irish family a long home-movie glance at the table laden with food before everyone sits down to eat is an invitation to join the feast. In this thoroughly postmodern way space and time fold into one another.

Seemingly antique rituals that cross the threshold between the living and the dead are shot through with practices that extend beyond the door of the house and out into a transnational world, mediated by technology.

The following is an account of the significance of ancestor worship and *giô* practices within one family, provided by a household head, a man who often must stand in as the head of the family (*tộc trưởng*):

> The day after tomorrow is the anniversary of my grandfather. I have to phone everybody and tell everybody to come up to my house and they will come over there. Some people, they are busy and they will not come, but most people will come—the family will always come. They come for a half an hour or one hour. We have food, and we eat the food there. My family are Buddhists, but my sister in law is Catholic—but we don't mind!
>
> On the *giô* we will all make a personal prayer. My uncle is the top man in the family and he has to pray first—take your older brother, he would have to pray first and then you—then my other brother and then my sister. It is step by step. You have the picture and you have food, you eat the food but you have to give the people that are dead the food as well. With my father, if he smoked before, if he drinks before, then we have to leave that there for him. You saw that when I left a bottle of whiskey for him. It's as if he were still alive. We invite him to join us. Normally, we split them up: my brother looks after my father and my mother, and I look after my grandfather and grandmother. You have to split it up because there are a lot of them and there are two different sides: there is the husband's side and the wife's side. You have to look after the two sides.
>
> Sometimes when the person is very old they have no picture. We have, generation to generation, a book, a way of keeping. … My grandfather and my father are all on it. They have to write on it everyone: step one, grandfather; step two comes down, father. Not every one does this. I have to buy the book myself. I don't really know how many people are before me, because they all live so far away. Only in Vietnam do people do this now, anyway. I wanted to do this for my family. Young people now they forget and in the future they may know nothing.
>
> If they see what we do all the time, on an anniversary, they will see and they will know what to do, and have a memory. But if you don't do that then in the future they know nothing. If we try to educate them and get them to do this then my children will do this in the future. Not every family will do this. From generation to generation you have to pass this on and not all families will do this. If you can keep this culture going then that will be good for the children.

This lengthy quotation raises a number of interesting themes. In today's world organised religion is often regarded as a sectional practice within modern lives, cut off from everyday activities and practiced in certain special places and at certain designated times. In this instance religion rests alongside ancestor worship and is more obviously stitched through the fabric of life, interweaving a view of family with beliefs and values that range from the sociological to the pedagogical. But religion also appears to be something other than ancestor worship, which exists in a strange alliance with it. Catholicism, Buddhism or Confucianism might be represented on the top of the altars, but these are the ancestors' altars, and it is the tenants who must conform to the landlords. The actual practices of ancestor worship, as described, are also interesting in the way the dead seem so at home with the living. But this lengthy extract might also be read as a statement about cultural practices in danger of slipping away. To read this extract in this way may be simplistic, and a more nuanced reading might begin by thinking of the statements about Vietnamese-Irish ancestor worship and its sociological importance as a productive attempt to struggle with the role and relevance of the family in the contemporary world. At the point at which Vietnamese-Irish people are speaking about the possibility of 'values' disappearing, one may also see what are considered to be older values being reinvigorated and new ones emerging.

Just as a polemic tone may be found in the words of some so too is despondency to be found in the words of other Vietnamese-Irish people. The following comments were recorded while discussing beliefs in the context of

marginality and poverty with one young man, who was injured while working

and forced to retire:

> I am becoming more involved in society here. And things change. But in Vietnam I would have to worship my ancestors because I am the eldest, and on an anniversary I have do something each year. The eldest son in each family has to gather all the siblings and their children to the house where they say a little prayer and show respect.
>
> [Author: *Does this mean it has no relevance here? If you had a son would you expect him to do this?*]
>
> No, I would not expect him to do this. If you are still deep in a culture then you will follow that culture. I grew up in Ireland so I can mix, and for me the culture is not so deep. But I would say that I would still do the same for my father in case he passes away. For my son, maybe, I wouldn't expect him to do this, I wouldn't mind. I still have some Vietnamese culture, so I might do.

Another young Vietnamese-Irish man made the following observations:

> I would not think that in my children's homes there will be an ancestors' altar, or that they will do that any more. They will go out and socialise and get married to Irish people, and that whole thing will be gone. That is a very big disappointment for me, but the culture is changing.
>
> I lived here for 25 years, yet I still keep my country to live in. In my home it *is* Vietnam; in my home it *is* Vietnamese food, my own food. But [*my children*] they think they're Irish; they speak perfect English; they live like the Irish people. But, to me, the culture, our family keeps what ever it can and they live their lives.

In the above extracts we can see quite clearly that certain Vietnamese-Irish

people have considered ancestor worship as a way through which to think about

generational differences and cultural change. The tone is as much pragmatic as

despondent. While the young men quoted in the above two extracts see their

world of values and practices in transformation the end result may not be what

Randolph Bourne once called 'a tasteless, colourless fluid of uniformity'.[202] On the contrary, one must look to what may be indexed by the above informant's conclusion that his 'family keeps whatever it can'. Preserving cultural values may not simply be about fast freezing worldviews or protecting material objects as sacred. What we are discussing may in fact be far more obviously connected to everyday social relations. Take the following words of a senior Vietnamese-Irish man, which were related to me during a discussion of ancestor worship:

> You see, years ago the people in Ireland looked after the old people. Now the young generation, they don't care. They have forgotten everything that is important. Old people now are living in the hospitals and the children don't want to look after them. If they look after them they have no time to go out. The people have forgotten about the old people and unless they have the memory our children will also forget. The people now are afraid for the old people to live with them—they forget that when you are born you know nothing—because sometimes the old people can annoy them and can be cranky. They don't want that and want to put the old people in the hospital. As if they can do that! They don't think of the future, and that their own children might do the same with them. If you do that then your children will think, 'Oh, my father he did that with my grandfather so I will do the same to him.' They say, why [should] I do for you and you don't do the same for me? You don't do this for your father then how can I be expected to do this for you, and that's the truth.

> Down the country it is more like it was in Vietnam. In the city, it is like the cities in Vietnam. That is why a lot of Irish people want to move down the country to live. They get help and advice from neighbours as well. They don't have much but they will help you anyway.
> …

> It is about the old generations that die and the memory for the family. The anniversary for those who died is a way for keeping the memory for the children, the grandfather the grandmother are kept for the children as memories. All the old people die and the children can have a memory of them. Who are they? This is how the children know.

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[202] Randolph Bourne, 'Transnational America', p. 89.

One must be mindful, however, of the danger of representing Vietnamese-Irish beliefs as if they were homogenous. Even within families differences are apparent. Two years ago I spoke to a young woman, the daughter of the senior Vietnamese-Irish man quoted above. When we came to the topic of ancestor worship she noted that this was a 'men's thing' and that the wider extended family was not as important to her as her own 'family'. She also noted that the ancestors' photographs on the altar in her front room were photographs of relatives and nothing more than that. As a child she had been encouraged to become involved in family prayers and reunion activities, but she felt that such practices held no deeper significance. At a young age she recalled queuing up behind her siblings to pray before the ancestors' altar with no idea of the appropriate response when her turn came. Her father hinted that she should pray, and she repeated, 'hello grandmother, goodbye grandmother' over and over until she was told to sit down. Before one concludes that she lost her beliefs, one must ask: what is it that she was expected to believe in? Ancestor worship, she suggested, meant little in today's world, but this same young woman argued vigorously for the importance of family values and for the necessity to preserve identity through respecting one's parents and the memories of dead relatives.

**Extending the Frame**

A number of classic studies have suggested that one consequence of migration is the gradual assimilation of existing cultural values to those of the new host society. In particular, some commentators have argued that the family is the site *par excellence* where social change is located. In this, William Goode's *World Revolution and Family Patterns* stands as a classic in articulating

what seems to be a pervasive loss of extended family structure in favour of the nuclear unit.[203] Closer to home, Conrad Arensberg's *The Irish Countryman* and *Family and Community* are once again useful. Arensberg's attention to the spaces of Irish home life was a part of a wider concern with the workings of the family as corporate unit. Few Irish youths in the County Clare of the 1930s could be catered for on the family farm, and he suggested that when they travelled to towns and cities or joined the wider diaspora their family travelled with them, in cultural ways. As noted earlier, he argued that: 'Time and change are inevitable in human affairs; only an orderly social mechanism can tame their ravages.'[204] Thus, the haemorrhage of emigration and migration was rendered ordinary by the accompanying movement of 'familism'.[205]

Alexander Humphreys was later to follow those same countrymen and women who settled in Dublin. He saw the countryman outside of the family, working through what it meant to be a city dweller— a species often imagined to be antagonistic to the notion of Irish identity, caustically described by John B. Keane as perverts from a built-up area. Humphreys was to record that the locus of social change had shifted: 'For in Dublin the primary influence upon community life and affairs is no longer exerted by the family and groups that are kindred to the family to which the countryman is accustomed, but by large,

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[203] See William Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (Free Press of Glencoe; Collier-Macmillan, 1963). There have been a multitude of criticisms of such approaches. For example, what is called the 'nuclear family' represents but one model of family structure even in Western society. Indeed, some have argued that the nuclear family is in terminal decline. There are dangers, therefore, in rendering 'normal' contingent historical and spatial forms, which is a point classical Marxists made in the 19th century. See Friedrich Engels, 'The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State,' in Robert Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York and London: Norton and Co. Inc., 1978), pp. 734-760.
[204] Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, p. 142.
[205] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

impersonal and non-familistic organisations, particularly of business and of government.'[206]

The battle lines are clear: for Humphreys the family is gently pulled to pieces by wider social forces; for Arensberg change was inevitable and the real question related to the manner in which people responded to new circumstances.[207] The anthropologist felt that people did not simply cast off their ways and dive headlong into the currents of change. 1930s Clare may have appeared peripheral but it was still a place that could not 'entirely escape modernity', where generations were raised for emigration.[208] This was unlike the rest of the British Isles, where Thomas Carlyle could suggest that emigration merely allowed for more elbowroom.

For Arensberg, then, something could be freed from place and sent abroad—a flexible and adaptable 'familism'. The weight of evidence is on his side. A wealth of contemporary research has demonstrated the persistence of 'family' despite the predictions of William Goode's *World Revolution and Family Patterns,* and yet more scholarly work has noted the importance of 'family' in migrant populations and ethnic minorities in terms of the networks necessary to everyday life. In *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese-Americans* Nazli Kibria has made the point that family is the 'strategic arena' for Vietnamese-Americans to realise their goals, from education to employment and socialising.[209] Rather than family being a remnant of the past

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[206] Alexander J. Humphreys, *The New Dubliners: Urbanisation and the Irish Family* (London Routledge, 1998 [1966]), p. 29.

[207] Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman,* p. 76.

[208] *Ibid.,* p.37.

[209] Nazli Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese-Americans* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 19. Kibria's study is one of a new generation of scholarly works that goes beyond the issues of economic

it may, in fact, be an important site in which people play out their identities in relation to their world.

Therefore, once again, we need to widen the frame. As a set of beliefs, ancestor worship stretches from the domain of religion into the concerns in many families over education, the disciplining of youth and ageing. But ancestor worship captures attention precisely because it is 'cultural'. What happens when the frame is widened?

One does not have to spend long in a Vietnamese-Irish home before noticing that the categorisation that the mind's eye makes between the ancestors' altars, shrines to the Kitchen God, *Tsao Chün* (in the case of Chinese-Vietnamese-Irish homes) or spirit of the kitchen, *Ông Táo* (in ethnic Vietnamese homes), family photographs and other objects in the room is often quite arbitrary. For example, in most homes either professional or amateur family photographs adorn the walls. These often depict the educational successes of the children in the family: graduation days in schools or universities, prizes being received, etc. In many homes such photographs are clustered in a manner that gives the impression that here is a shrine to the present, to the young, which is competing with the ancestors' altar. It is more likely, of course, that both processes of enshrining have sympathetic relationship—they bear a family resemblance in more ways than one.

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adaptation and mental health of refugees/migrants. Beyond such money and madness studies, Kibria's work looks at how family and host society interact in creative ways. Indeed, she challenges the unified ways in which family has often been represented in migration literature.

**Figure 26: 'An Ancestors' Altar & Family Photographs'**



(Photograph by Thai Van Nga)

As illustrated by Figure 24, earlier in this chapter, which depicts a shrine to the

Kitchen God, or Spirit of the Kitchen, the frame may be extended further to see

how Vietnamese-ness literally sits on top of contemporary technology and

furniture. Owning a big-screen TV and other up-to-the minute gadgetry are

matters of importance in Vietnamese-Irish households. Material success is also

prized across the world of the *Viet Kieu,* and successes are measured one off the

other through transnational communications, travel and home videos, for

example. But material success, marked by home possessions, is not a marker of

simply the consumption of commodities or the pursuit of an abstract notion of

wealth, though such elements certainly exist. Material success is benchmarked

against the broader success of the family; possessions are the family's

possessions, and a family that is not succeeding, changing and accumulating is

not a family in the Vietnamese-Irish sense. What connects together

contemporary consumer goods, photographs of educational successes and achievements, and shrines to one's ancestors in a Vietnamese-Irish home is precisely a fluid and dynamic notion of family and a process that we may call enshrining. One way in which this can be observed is through how education is managed in the home.

**Shaping Identity at Home**

In a conversation between a Vietnamese-Irish man, a former resettlement worker and myself the following statements were recorded (the names are, of course, pseudonyms):

> Ngoc: He will tell you [*pointing at the author*]. He knows that a lot of Vietnamese that come here in 1979. They do very well. Some of them in Dublin have big houses. One lady has three houses. A lot of people they do big business in Dublin. But some are still not doing well. ...
> The children go into education and they want to do big business as well. All my children, do you remember? My daughter is in the college, she studies science, and now she wants to do nursing.
> *Margaret, resettlement worker:* The difference with the immigrants here now is that they have English when they arrive. And they have it very good. These would be asylum seekers.
> Ngoc: Nigerians. I see them a lot in Dublin.
> *Margaret:* Looking back now, I don't think I'd change anything when it comes to the way things were handled here. They all came in families; they were all together. And they came to one location. Now they would have been very much at sea and frightened. It was nice that they were all together instead of, ideally, everyone having a house.
> Ngoc: My family, now, they all live in the one area, near to each other. They get up every day and go to work and even some people that live near them don't—they stay at home and get the labour. We want to work and not go to the Government and ask for the money—we want to do it for ourselves. That's why we didn't ask the Government for much.
> ...
> Ngoc: a man from the Government asked me: which way for the Vietnamese people? And I said it is better you leave them to themselves, to stay together and that way they can look after themselves. If not they will come to you all the time.
> *Margaret:* The disadvantage of them all living together was the language. But then you kept yourselves to yourselves for a long time, and then you moved out.

Ngoc: But we came over here with only one hope. We learned how to live in this country so that the children could get an education. That is the main thing. The language is not important for us but it is important for the kids. And the children learn the two languages and can explain things to their parents. We try to get them a good education—we work very hard for them! We don't want them to give back to us; we want them to go on for themselves. That is why our people do what we do.

The sentiments expressed by this Vietnamese-Irish man resonate deeply with others. One gets an impression that here is a man grimly determined to pursue a course in the direction of a better future, conceived of in terms of educational achievement for his family and material success. In his words one can detect that education is understood as the most significant mechanism through which a better future may be realised. Here is a portrait of a father holding up his children in his arms and lifting them towards what he considers to be achievable goals. Stereotypically, this is what the Vietnamese-Irish, his 'people', do.

In order for the second-generation Vietnamese-Irish to arrive at the goals their parents set for them one would have to assume that they share their parents' values, that the education system is equitable and either blind to ethnicity or supportive of difference, and that such goals are practicable even in ideal circumstances. Most of these assumptions are difficult to support. Frieda McGovern made the point that, throughout the first decade of the resettlement process, language acquisition was the foremost problem.[210] To repeat, circa 1980 the 'Agreed Report on the Third Phase of Resettlement Programme for Vietnamese Refugees' noted: 'Formal instruction in English ceased when the refugees left the

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[210] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 175.

reception centres. It is not considered that schoolgoing [*sic*] children will need further special instruction in English.'[211]

By the mid 1980s, there were no programmes in the English language for Vietnamese children of compulsory school-going age.[212]  In 1981 there were over 60 Vietnamese children of compulsory school-going age in this category, 39 boys and 23 girls, ranging in age from 5 to 15 years. According to the Refugee Resettlement Committee Annual Report for 1986, the older the children were the more problems existed. The standard strategy through which a school dealt with a Vietnamese-Irish child in their early teens with little English was to put them in classes suitable for pupils many years their junior.[213] Some Vietnamese-Irish children excelled in school, particularly in subjects such as mathematics; others did not fare so well with many leaving mainstream education in the 1980s without qualifications.[214] When one mixed these structural problems with racism, marginality and a certain inward-looking tendency amongst Vietnamese-Irish children, then in the 1980s all was not well. The education system, what some commentators have described as a machine for acculturation, was thrown into reverse and rather than producing a uniformed and well-educated Irishness it may, in fact, have contributed to the maintenance of difference. But the most interesting aspects of the story of the education of 'quiet', 'well behaved' and 'neat' Vietnamese-Irish children is not located inside the gates of Dublin City schools but, rather, in the role of education within families.

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[211] Sub-Committee on Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees, 'Agreed Report on the Third Phase of Resettlement Programme for Vietnamese Refugees,' p. 3.
[212] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 132.
[213] Refugee Resettlement Committee, 'Annual Report,' para. 2.2.
[214] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 196.

In Vietnamese-Irish homes education is the commodity prized above all. Children are pushed to succeed and acquire wealth and status beyond that which their parents possess through their performance at school and at university. To graduate from secondary school and later university is to have one's photograph on the living room wall—a mark of family success and a model for the emulation of others. Such achievements are born of family efforts and sacrifices that often come to dominate home life and draw attention to the problems the family is experiencing. According to one Vietnamese-Irish person:

> I put the kids into the high school over there [*pointing towards the school*]. When I moved to Coolock they went to [*school there*]. In 1981 two more children came over from Vietnam. We have six now. The oldest kids were two years old when they came to Ireland. Going to school was ok for the kids because they had English, but at home we have to speak Vietnamese all the time. They learn Vietnamese at home and they go to school and they learn English. If the parents don't know English then it difficult because the parents don't know what is going on—they don't know!

> At home we speak Vietnamese all they time. For the home, for the family, they talk in Vietnamese, for the old people. But to go outside they have to talk in English because outside it is English. That is outside culture. And some Vietnamese-Chinese people they teach them Chinese and they speak Chinese in the home for the family.

The use of the term 'outside culture' is obviously interesting, as clear spatial demarcations seem to exist for this Vietnamese-Irish individual. For the second-generation, crossing into 'outside culture' is what they do every day; for those who arrived as adults in 1979 more comfort is had by remaining inside the home, takeaway or community centre. Education requires difficult boundaries to be crossed—indeed it demands, as a family enterprise, that the school becomes a site for Vietnamese-Irish strategies and tactics. Take the words of May (pseudonym), a fairly young mother, who described raising her children to me in broad terms:

I don't think there is any problem with my children and the local people. The children don't have much difficulty with them. They don't talk much because they are not open wide in themselves. So they don't have troubles with local people because they don't make friends easily. But where I lived, where some of us live, the areas are not so nice and we don't let the children play there.

I go to meetings with the teachers all the time and I know that they complain that the Vietnamese children they very silent and they don't want to talk about anything. But they are very clever, they know more than they say.

A much older Vietnamese-Irish man put some of the issues in more blunt

language:

At home, because you [*pointing to the author*] are Irish, when your children come home you can teach them. They come back home with homework and you can teach your children. We don't know the language, so how can we teach them? They have to learn by themselves, you got me. By themselves! I always tell my children: 'your Father has very poor English, if you don't know you have to ask your friend or you have to ask a teacher.'

In our country the children always listen to their father, but when we come over here we can't say you always must listen to me, I know what to do. Over here it is different. They have to make their own way and we help them, we adapt.

I don't say that the Irish people are wrong or right or anything like that. The children have to learn here because they are growing up here not Vietnam. They are living here they are not living in Vietnam. If you are too hard with them they don't know which way to go. You let them do what they like, but you explain to them when something is the wrong way. We say to them don't smoke the hash, don't drink too much or fight or anything like that, and we say study, the more you study the better it is for you. And they do what they want after that. That's the only way we try to influence them.

But one could not accuse this man of being a libertarian: his children are models

of civility and politeness, their manners bespeak a home in which strict codes of

behaviour and values have been instilled from a young age. The most

outstanding value that permeates this man's home is that of education— 'we say study'—and education structures and dominates much of home life for his family. The challenges of crossing boundaries to render the school a site of Vietnamese-ness for his children have been met by this man. He loves to tell the following story:

> It is not difficult with the teachers because when I go there I listen. I go to listen not to talk. Only sometimes I get a report from the school. I had one of them when she didn't go to school, and she didn't go to school for two weeks! So I sit and read and watch TV, and then she comes home. 'Hello,' I say, 'how's school?' She says everything is good and she tells me about difficult classes. When I asked she said she go to school all the time. I said ok. But I go to the school to ask the teachers what day she goes to school what days she is off and I get all the information from the school. I talk to them. You see, that's what I do, and that's the way.
>
> So I have all the information. And then she comes home. 'Hello,' I say, 'how's school?' I say you tell me a lie! I have evidence and I ask what do you want me to do, and after that she was good because she knows now that I talk to them and she have to act in school like she act here.

Just as this story is told and retold as an illustration of the resourcefulness of the older generation so too is a well-worn joke, which demonstrates the ingenuity of youth, enjoyed by the younger people—an unintended consequence of a Vietnamese-Irish 'education' in which being smart does not simply mean educational achievements. Several years ago a senior and well-respected Vietnamese-Irish man was asked to go to an annual parent/teacher meeting. His son, an excellent student, had that year absented himself from school regularly and had several times forged explanatory notes from his parents. The class tutor suspected something was amiss. The well-respected Vietnamese-Irish man spoke no English, however, and the class tutor spoke no Vietnamese. Thus, all communication had to pass through the young student. 'Tell your father that we know you've been hanging around the amusement arcade,' shouted the teacher.

The boy turned to his father and said, 'He wants you to know that I'm top of my class,' in Vietnamese. 'Why is he shouting?' asked the boy's father. 'He's hard of hearing and very excited,' replied the boy in Vietnamese, before turning to the teacher and saying, in English, 'He says you can't prove that!'

Material culture in Vietnamese-Irish homes tells stories of families that have been scattered by war and traumatised by the experience of being a refugee. Such material culture also tells the story of families who have held together as they faced the challenge of resettling in a new country, educating their children and providing them with the means for a successful future. One may read Vietnamese-Irish homes in order to learn these stories. In many cases cultural analysis suggests that when we search for complexity, the 'continuous, semi-physical dream' of people's lives, we often find that the greatest depths are on the surface and may be seen in the ways that people carry out their everyday lives. An obvious marker of cultural difference in Vietnamese-Irish homes is the ancestors' altar yet even such a marker may only be understood in a wider social, material and spatial context. Demons, deities and dead people make up an ancestors' altar not a culture, but culture is fashioned from such resources. If one were to think of the future then one might imagine the ancestors giving way to a more flexible set of memorial practices, and perhaps this has already occurred. But this does not suggest careless assimilation, as the words of this Vietnamese-Irish man suggest:

> Probably our children will change to Irish culture or something like that. But some children will still keep the tradition. I can say ten years or 15 years later, probably they will still keep the culture, the memory of the family. Because our family has the thing for to pray in that room. Every year around the family my brother has the *giô, dan giô*. Because the culture is the family together.

If like this man we are to conceive of Vietnamese-Irish culture as the family together then we must also seek out the ways in which this notion of identity plays out for those living their lives on the farthest side of the hyphen, the second-generation. I do this in the last chapter of this thesis. However, at this juncture it is important to theoretically clarify my position on a number of issues related to culture, material objects, identity and belonging. What I have been discussing in the this chapter and elsewhere in this thesis is a process of enshrining: how Vietnamese-Irish people trace the outlines of the lives they live on the world around them in such a way as those outlines may serve to help shape the lives they live. This is a broader anthropological and philosophical issue, which draws together problems in how space and time, power and knowledge are conceived. Thus, a brief essay situating these issues theoretically is demanded.

## Chapter 5: Enshrining

> This western book says that in the age of Yao there was a flood. Their country's prince used one great ship and took all the people and birds and animals within the country and fled to occupy the inaccessible top of a high mountain. It also says that at the time of this flood within their country there only existed seven people. Later the people daily increased, but all of them stemmed from the ancestry of these seven people. Such a theory is truly unfounded!
>
> It also says that their country had one prince who led the people out of the country to manufacture and erect a heavenly pagoda. Its height was goodness knows how many *truong*, and he wanted to climb it and roam the heavenly palace in order to examine the conditions in heaven. The emperor of heaven was afraid and immediately ordered heavenly bureaucrats to come down and change their tones [*languages*], causing them to be unable mutually to work together. Hence they were unable to complete their pagoda. That every place in their country now has different languages and customs is attributed to this. This theory is even more irrational.
>
> – Comments of Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mang (1820-1840) on his first reading of the Bible.[215]

To reach the village of Khanh Hau in South Vietnam, as Gerald Cannon Hickey informed his readers in 1964, one had to travel south by road from Saigon, through the Chinese city of Cholon and on to the delta of the Mekong River. It was at the river delta that the scene changed from urban to rural. Paddy fields stretched out across the horizon and threatened to engulf the tiny hamlets built upon them. Even substantial market towns along the route seemed like islands floating in a timeless sea. 55km from Saigon was the small world of Khanh Hau. Just as Conrad Arensberg once attempted in the West of Ireland, here Hickey would try to make this little hamlet speak about Vietnam.

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[215] Quoted in Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'Religion in Vietnam: A World of Gods and Spirits,' in Donald W.P. Elliott, Gerald Cannon Hickey, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, Hue Tam Ho Tai and Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture and Society*, pp. 32-33 passim.

Following his opening description, which resonated with the *mise-en-scène* favoured since Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, the author patiently elaborated every possible detail that one would expect to find in a monograph of this style and quality, from themes such as the physiographic setting of the village to kinship, family and social mobility.[216] The intention of the monograph, as set out in the preface, could just as easily have been penned by Conrad Arensberg: 'to unfold the fabric of interrelated social institutions that have to do with all aspects of village life, not from a flat, two-dimensional view but to show the changes that have been occurring and continue to occur—and relate it to the greater society of which it is a part'.[217] But Hickey's journey from urban and modern Saigon to rural and pre-modern Khanh Hau was also a journey of the ethnographic imaginary, which tested the limits of representation.

This village in Vietnam, which seemed to stage a timeless play, was brought to life by a cast of characters seamlessly bound together and to the land. The rice trade, for example, like much else, was rooted in 'several thousand years' of tradition.[218] In this, even the radical journalist Francis Fitzgerald was of the same mind: 'At birth each child took his place, as it were on an escalator, and held it while moving upwards through the generations.'[219] Thus, when considering the very idea of Vietnamese culture one is brought face-to-face with *difference*, with a world in which a historical figure such as the Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mang, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter,

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[216] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, 1978).

[217] Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam*, p. xxv.

[218] *Ibid.*, p. 134.

[219] Francis FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 109.

could read Western theology an conclude that it was other people's incoherent mythology—in this way, *Village in Vietnam* seemed to bring its readers to an strange land filled with unfamiliar landmarks of thought.

However, it does not take long before we realise that, on the matter of livelihood for example, Khanh Hau was on the cutting edge of what passed for South Vietnamese modernisation—indeed, if one were to invent the term 'over-modernisation' then Khanh Hau would act as an excellent example to illustrate the utility of such a term. It had badly performing experimental gardens funded by a San Francisco-based foundation, disease-riddled Yorkshire pigs on a pilot program, buffalo imported from Thailand by the South Vietnamese Government, and chickens sponsored by UNESCO. Like Ralph Linton's famous description of the typical American breakfast, much of what was traditional had just arrived from somewhere else.[220]

How could a place present an unchanging fabric to the world and yet, at the same time, be stitched through with the threads of modernity, acting as a fantastic laboratory for 'scientific' attempts to alter social and economic practice? How could people appear to belong in such a rooted and serene way in a context of unbelievably violent social change? Resurrecting *Village in Vietnam*, a now forgotten moment from the ethnographic past, has an importance beyond curiosity. Occasionally, the anthropologist hinted that there was something lodged in the heart of what we call culture that acted as a mechanism through which answers to such questions may be discerned:

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[220] Linton finished his description of the traditional and authentic breakfast with the typical American scanning the 'latest editorial pointing out the dire results to our institutions of accepting foreign ideas' and not failing to 'thank a Hebrew God in an Indo-European language that he is one hundred percent (decimal system invented by the

> *Nha* does not simply mean "house" in the sense of a physical structure; it implies the household group, the hearth, or the centre of the individual's world—concepts reflected in the endearing *nha toi* used by a young husband to address his wife or when a villager refers to things (such as land) *cua nha*, "belonging to the household."[221]

Between the words people used, the concrete world that they filled, and the images sketched out by those he spoke to, the anthropologist occasionally touched upon a diagram of social forces. As the above comment by Hickey successfully illustrates, language and material culture, a house and familiar modes of address in this instance, are brought together and activated in people's everyday lives by something fluid and hard to pin down, something that lies between discourse and the 'physical' world.

The same philosophical and anthropological theme haunts the work of Conrad Arensberg: just how did people successfully manage change, and the decimation wrought by emigration, in a way that kept at least the surface of the social form intact? In the opening passages of *The Irish Countryman,* in his celebrated description of the west room, one is led to the conclusion that the material culture of the home and the idea of 'family' enshrined therein— in space—one is offered with a way through which to see together the social and cultural forces of diaspora and death, memory and migration, land and customary law, family and friendship, to name but a few themes. Just as Hickey fortuitously ascribed a powerful role to spatial practices, so too was the West of

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Greeks) American (from Americus Vespucci, Italian geographer). See Ralph Linton, 'One Hundred Percent American,' *The American Mercury,* 40, (1937), pp. 427-429.
[221] Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Village in Vietnam,* p. 158.

Ireland home conceived of not as empty space but, rather, as lived space, dynamic and animated.[222]

One may mine the work of both anthropologists—both students of the work of Robert Redfield and W. Lloyd Warner—for tantalising hints at and enticing half-glimpses of a core question in all cultural study: how do people enshrine their sense of belonging in a world frequently shattered by change?  In the formal, *haut*-aesthetic world of Anglo-Irish letters, Elizabeth Bowen devoted herself not to answering this question as such, but rather to articulating it more precisely.  She once described her artistic intention in a BBC documentary as

> aiming to give the effect of fortuity, of a smashed-up pattern with its
> fragments impacting on one another, drifting and cracking ... [because
> of] the horror beneath the surface, the maintenance of the surface of a
> subject fascinates me.  In fact, the more the surface seems to heave or
> threaten to crack, the more its actual pattern fascinates *me*. [223]

She was an author for whom 'places loom large'.[224]  The masterpiece of her 'Irish' writing, *Bowen's Court*, suggests that it is somewhere in the lived space of people's lives that belonging arises.  Perhaps in something seemingly vague, such as her descriptions of the atmosphere of a home enlivened by the dead and inhabited by an elite minority, itself half-dead, one begins to consider what intervenes, what makes a place intimate and meaningful.

Here we are discussing what may be termed enshrining.  Anthropologists such as Gerald Cannon Hickey and Conrad Arensberg seem almost inevitably to have been drawn to this practice; literary artists such as Elizabeth Bowen recognised it and attempted to expose its consequences.  It is a concept that has a

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[222] See *Ibid.*,p.32-33 for a detailed discussion.

[223] Interview by Jocelyn Brooke, BBC 1950.  Quoted in R.F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History*, p. 103.

rich literature, because what each in their own way was approaching was a way of thinking about culture and history spatially. And, much of this work has been about how Vietnamese-Irish culture and history may be thought of in similar ways. In *The Production of Space*, the *magnum opus* of Henri Lefebvre, we find this question not just being echoed but, in fact, acting as an axis around which his thoughts revolve:

> The question is what intervenes, what occupies the interstices between representations of space and representational spaces. A culture, perhaps? Certainly – but the word has less content than it seems to have. The work of artistic creation? No doubt – but that leaves unanswered the queries 'By whom? And 'How?' Imagination? Perhaps – but why? and for whom?[225]

This same question concerns me here. And, it is through the work of spatial thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault that I will argue that by reasserting the role of space important light may be thrown on Vietnamese-Irish life and, indeed, on cultural studies in general. When considering Vietnamese-Irish home life in the last chapter the metaphor of frames was employed: through the door of the house, one's eye is drawn immediately to the seemingly ancient shrines; yet, the texture of the everyday is also comprised of modern technology and family photographs. As one widens the frame to include the latter in the index of meaningful objects, it becomes apparent that it is the connections that tell the most interesting cultural stories, about culture itself. In rooms in which time and space are configured in such a way that the past and far away are brought into the world of the here and now, a complex weave of life becomes apparent, which is clearly enshrined in space.

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[224] *Ibid.*

[225] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (London: Blackwell, 1991), p. 43.

To discuss family photographs is to talk about how education is negotiated in and beyond the home; to discuss technology and consumption is to talk about takeaways and achievement and how consumption is 'domesticated' as a meaningful index of achievement. Just as Gerald Canon Hickey noted something in the cultural world of Khanh Hau that was beyond physical structures, metaphors or modes of address, something which nonetheless allowed all of this to hang together, giving the impression of stability and mediating change, so too will I argue that Vietnamese-Irish life presents a distinct minority pattern, an order of things and of time and distance that hangs together in space, in a broader weave. Here I am ethnographically extending a proposition put forward by Henri Lefebvre: 'social relations ... have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial.*'[226] And, I am suggesting that this process of spatial production may be termed enshrining.[227]

**Enshrining Vietnamese-Irishness**

An incredible sense of hurried yet precise movement—what's called 'hustle' in the American fast food industry—, the intense and short-lived smells, smoke, steam, and the noise of sharp jokes and orders rolled into one another go together to give Vietnamese-Irish takeaway businesses a similar feel, an instant recognisability once one has been to one before. In the Vietnamese-Irish Association's buildings the 'hustle' is gone but the jokes and the smell of food remain. Karaoke sessions to the backdrop of DVDs of Vietnamese scenery remind one that those who the night before earned a tough livelihood behind the

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[226] *Ibid.*, p. 404.

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counter of a Dublin takeaway are also connected by memory, travel and family to one of the longest wars of the twentieth century. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that the Vietnamese-Irish have remained half-hidden on the landscape of the national imagination and that, despite the frequent verbal abuse, their 'Chinese' takeaway restaurants have remained an unattended presence in Irish neighbourhoods for decades now. How is this so, and what are the consequences of this pattern for belonging?

Throughout the course of research for this dissertation a number of senior Vietnamese-Irish men (in particular) assisted by providing introductions, confirming facts, granting and arranging interviews. The traffic was not one way, as one may be both an ethnographer and a house painter or babysitter; and, one may record notes on ancestor worship while assembling a planning application for a new restaurant or seeking community funding. My informants understood the co-operative nature of ethnography.

As one might expect, a few informants stood out as the most valuable contributors. One individual in particular contributed his own unique perspective of Vietnamese-Irish life by imagining what it meant to have such a hyphenated identity in Ireland through photographs. These photographs are dispersed throughout this text, but one stood out for him as a good representation of what that identity meant physically, in straightforward visible terms.

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[227] In describing enshrining as 'production' I am following Lefebvre's broad employment of the term, which rescues it from the more narrow use it was put to in the work of Marx and Engels. See *Ibid.,* p. 68.

**Figure 27: 'Belonging to the Threshold'**



(Photograph by Thai Van Nga)

It was not a photograph of a takeaway or a karaoke session in the Community Centre but an image of a front door demarcating Ireland and Vietnam—the world of his 'country' and the world of Ireland, a place that had given him 'freedom'. As articulated previously in this study when discussing general patterns, this man suggested that it was the crossing points between 'Vietnamese' and 'Irish' that were the most significant. But the home for him was also something special and particular. His home seemed to be a way of thinking and talking about identity. Through the door of his house lay 'a piece of my country', a place comprised of enormous refrigerators, stereos and televisions, which marked the success he understood himself to have achieved. His back garden on a hot day could well have been in a suburb of Ho Chi Minh City: bamboo, lychee and grape vines are everywhere between the high walls,

and a good-luck pond is filled with exotic fish and surrounded by light timber painted with images of monkeys. But it is inside, in the front room of the house, opposite the large television that one finds his identity most obviously enshrined. The ancestor's altar with its panoply of demons, deities and photographs dead relatives, with its half drunk bottle of whiskey and cigarette burned to the end from a recent *ngày giô,* represented his religion, family, identity, future and past—it seemed to enshrine everything.

As a cultural production, ancestor worship is also an attention seeker that, in some ways, hides its broader spatial underpinning. This seemingly ancient practice that extends from the depths of tradition in a far away country is, as I have argued in the previous chapter, dynamic by its nature and intimately connected with consumer culture, family photographs, etc. in the texture of everyday life. It is also a practice that has managed to fold itself neatly into a transnational world in which home videos connect up multinational families to a concept of family rendered concrete by modern media technology. By enshrining culture in such a way, Vietnamese-Irish people like my informant brought together the elements necessary to forge something that was not just good to think, to borrow a phrase from Claude Lévi-Strauss: enshrining does not just provoke the mind, because it is fashioned and contingent yet closer somehow to the concrete world and, thus, it may extend beyond thought and beyond explanation. Enshrining is more than being good to think, it also is excellent to assume because it congeals and forms into logos both time and space.

The pattern of Vietnamese-Irish life and the spaces implicated are not entirely unique to this minority in Ireland. Nor is the Vietnamese-Irish minority exceptional from an international perspective. In the exemplary anthropological

work of James L. Watson the world of one of the least understood of the United Kingdom's minorities, the overseas Chinese, is explored.[228] According to Watson, by the 1970s, except for a small ward in Liverpool and Soho in London, the overseas Chinese had settled in a relatively dispersed pattern and had thus not been perceived as a 'problem'. Most lived by the catering trade and kept low profiles in terms of civic and political participation. According to Watson, 'the Chinese have managed to remain aloof from British society'.[229] They lived in and through familial networks supported by the catering trade, which stretched from Hong Kong to the UK and across Europe, from Germany to Scandinavia. Lineage was crucial in the world of many overseas Chinese, according to Watson: many could trace their lineage to a founding ancestor, often over 30 generations or more, and kinship could be seen as 'an intermediary institution' in most interactions in business and social life.[230] Kinship, perhaps conceived of better under the broad umbrella of 'family', acted as a resource base for labour for the catering trade. It was also the network through which money, support and information flowed. As in the Vietnamese-Irish example, in the cases Watson was documenting, 'family' seemed to be at the beginning and end of many people's meaningful horizons.

The comparison between James Watson's work and my own should not be stretched beyond its utility, but two features may be drawn out usefully at his juncture: firstly, the manner in which the overseas Chinese in the UK seem to

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[228] See, for example, James L. Watson, 'The Chinese: Hong Kong Villagers in the British Catering Trade' in James L. Watson (ed.) *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), pp. 181-214; and James L. Watson, *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage: The Mans in Hong Kong and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).
[229] James L. Watson, 'The Chinese: Hong Kong Villagers in the British Catering Trade', p. 182.

maintain an unattended presence within the nation-state; and, secondly, the role of ancestor worship within this minority. I am interested in briefly juxtaposing this with the unattended presence of Vietnamese-Irish people in Ireland and their enshrining of culture, as I believe that there is an interesting connection between the first and second point, which may profitably be examined in spatial terms.

In James Watson's work the *Man* lineage, which sprang from Hong Kong's New Territories, is an excellent example of a transnational minority. The catering trade in the UK and other European cities in the 1970s supported a region in Hong Kong that may be understood using the term 'emigrant community'.[231] In the UK, catering establishments, according to Watson, resembled 'virtual islands of Chinese culture'; many of the staff members did not learn English nor felt any need to do so, as enough family members had learned English in order to act as intermediaries.[232] Because of factors such as the structure of opening hours and the lack of direct competition with 'English' workers, these profitable islands of Chinese culture formed an 'unobtrusive niche on the fringe of the British economy'.[233] Watson argues convincingly that such cultural islands are understandable only by extending one's analysis to include Hong Kong's New Territories. Many Hong Kong villages such as San Tin, which he documented closely, subsisted almost entirely on emigrant remittances. Emigrants bought land in the New Territories on which to build modern 'Stirling houses', which constituted a large percentage of all dwellings in many villages. These houses were the emigrants' stakes in their 'home'. Public buildings and

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[230] *Ibid.,* p. 186.

[231] Conventionally, an emigrant community is defined as any community, town village, etc. where over 50% of income is generated through remittances.

[232] James L. Watson, 'The Chinese: Hong Kong Villagers in the British Catering Trade', p. 193. The second generation were becoming the translators by the later 1970s.

civic projects were also funded by requests for donations from successful *émigrés*. Enshrined, along with the 'Stirling houses', are the social practices and material culture of ancestor worship.[234] Annual pilgrimages to the tomb of the founding ancestor constitute just one obvious and highly visible social practice, which connects an overseas emigrant community to 'home', to a world of tradition, to a world intimately connected to and, indeed, supported by activities in Europe. Europe may well be conceived of by many of these transnationals as a 'backwater' but its status as a periphery does not lessen its importance.[235]

The Vietnamese-Irish do not support an emigrant community in Vietnam, though powerful connections are maintained through businesses there and the funding of civic projects since the opening of the country through *Doi Moi* or 'the new change'. Sometimes marriages are even arranged in Vietnam. However, the Vietnamese-Irish population are not tied to any one town or even region. During group trips to Vietnam, often up to twenty people travel together, but on arrival they disperse to the towns and villages of their kindred. Like the overseas Chinese in the UK, as recorded by Watson, the Vietnamese-Irish maintain an unattended presence in the nation-state. And, this too is only understandable by taking cognisance of Vietnam and of the wider diaspora within their lives. I would argue that their identity, largely unfixed in just one nation-state, is reflected through ancestor worship, if conceived of not as abstract religious belief but, rather, as just one obvious form of enshrining, because

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[233] *Ibid.*, p. 194.

[234] For interesting ethnographic visual material from Watson's fieldwork see:
http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~anth1880/ethnographic_Photos/

[235] James L. Watson, 'The Chinese: Hong Kong Villagers in the British Catering Trade,' p. 195.

belonging acquires a certain fixity through enshrining.[236] Thus far, I have

suggested that enshrining must be understood as something ultimately spatial.

To draw out this thinking further it is necessary to explore current spatial

thinking in order to find resonant ideas.

**Reasserting the Spatial Turn**

There is a rich and important literature in the discipline of anthropology

on space.[237] It would not require much effort to piece together a genealogy that

goes back at least to the influential social analysis of Emile Durkheim and,

perhaps, even to Herbert Spencer; and in the era of structural-functionalism both

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and E.E. Evans-Pritchard gave prominence to the notion

of space, albeit in rather static ways.[238] Despite this genealogy, and the valuable

data to be found in the writings of the discipline's ancestors, it may still be

argued that space has only recently found its voice through the work of a younger

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[236] When discussing the unattended presence of minorities and the manner in which their identity is enshrined in transnational spaces it is crucial to remind oneself that such identities are not hermetically sealed from the influences of the nation-state, economy, labour market segregation and, indeed, racism. Rather, I am arguing that patterns that tend obviously towards the global are often generated *by* more localised structural forces within nation-states. In both Watson's work and my own it is in the second and third generations that one finds that the tensions between life in one nation-state and the cultural patterns leant by transnational connections are most clearly exposed.

[237] The exemplary research that springs most obviously to mind includes the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu and James Fernandez. For Lévi-Strauss's thinking on structure and space see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963). See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Kabyle House,' in Mary Douglas (ed.) *Rules and Meanings* (London, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), pp. 98-110. Fernandez's research is best exemplified in James W. Fernandez, *Fang Architectonics* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1977).

[238] See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Macmillian, 1915) (In Durkheim's work space is intimate to knowledge and the organisation of a society and was understood as a capacity); and, Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (New York: Appleton, 1873). For the work of the structural-functionalists see A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London, Cohen & West, 1952); and, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Charendon Press, 1940). In this, the structural-functional mobilisation of space differs

generation of anthropologists. Contemporary anthropological thinking does not just reflect a growing awareness of space: such thinking also dovetails with the ongoing spatial turn in critical social theory and postmodernism. In this, a great debt is owed to the persistent influence of the work of Henri Lefebvre and, in a less explicit way, to that of Michel Foucault.[239]

Briefly, I will retrace some of the steps taken by Foucault in an intellectual journey in which space was increasingly recognised for its importance. This 'narrative' has already been told elsewhere and my goal in recalling a version of it here is to bring a specific argument about space to the fore.[240] Essentially, in the rather under-appreciated comments he made about 'diagrams' (comments that are not fully tracked down in his work but, rather, embedded in his writing) I see a clearing in which an anthropological approach to enshrining may yield fruitful results. This anthropological approach, I propose, may further be refined by augmenting the broad brush strokes painted by Foucault with the finer detail provided by Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space.* In this, I ethnographically contribute to existing anthropological literature.[241]

It is doubtless important to see the work of Foucault as being embedded in a decisive break with the philosophy of the subject and of consciousness, which

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in important ways from Malinowski's more detailed focus of the uses of space. See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* passim.

[239] For an example of the influence of Foucault see Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of Missionary and Didactic Pathos* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

[240] Edward W. Soja, 'History: Geography: Modernity,' in Simon During (ed.) *The Cultural Studies Reader,* second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

[241] See A. Jamie Saris, 'Mad Kings, Proper Houses, and an Asylum in Rural Ireland,' *The American Anthropologist,* vol. 98, no. 3, (1996), pp. 539-554.

reached a kind of apex in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.[242]  It is also crucial to

reassert the break he and others made in the 1960s with the privileged role assigned

to time in much of existentialist and Marxist scholarship.[243]  This break with the

philosophy of the subject and concern to draw space to the foreground are

discernable as a conjoined project in *The Order of Things,* which has remained

somewhat under-theorised in anthropology, and this despite the obvious

implications for the notion of culture, the place of anthropology in his genealogy of

the human sciences, and the fact that the text is replete with spatial thinking.  In

terms of the latter theme it is possible to argue that this under-theorisation is a

consequence of an impression that Foucault is merely mobilising spatial imagery

and metaphors.  This is not so.  Even his celebrated opening vignette on how

knowledge holds together, quoting 'a certain Chinese encyclopaedia', is

elementally a discussion of space, and 'the sudden vicinity of things that have no

relation to one another'.[244]  Such heterotopias, as he defines them, have the power

to arrest grammar, provoke laughter and 'dissolve our myths', in the same way as

the words of Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mang, quoted in the epigraph to this

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[242] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Andover: Tavistock Publications, 1972).  For a detailed critical analysis see Herbert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
[243] See Michel Foucault (interviewed by Paul Rabinow), 'Space, Power and Knowledge,' in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, p. 140.
[244] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xvi-xvii passim.  A recent rephrasing of this thinking may be found in Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1999); however, the distance to Wittgenstein is far less: 'It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive.  We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it breaks; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro.' See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 6.

chapter, somehow manages. Foucault's thinking seems to be trained on order at this point:

> Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.[245]

From here the progress of his thinking is clear: cultures, he argues, have a grammar governing language, perception, exchanges, etc. which established the empirical orders, of 'home'. There also exists abstract orders, which explain what home is and why it is here and nowhere else.

> But between these two regions, so distant from one another, lies a domain which, even though its role is mainly an intermediary one, is nonetheless fundamental: it is more confused, more obscure, and probably less easy to analyse. ...
> Thus, between the already 'encoded' eye and reflexive knowledge there is a middle region which liberates order itself: it is here that it appears, according to the culture and the age in question, continuous and graduated or discontinuous and piecemeal, linked to space or constituted anew by the driving force of time, related to a series of variables of defined by separate systems of coherences, composed of resemblances which are either successive or corresponding, organised around increasing differences, etc. This middle region, then, ... can be posited as the most fundamental of all.[246]

From here, Foucault attempts to uncover the epistemological field, the *episteme*. Later, by the time he wrote *Discipline and Punish*, space was allowing him to 'grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and

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[245] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xxi.
[246] *Ibid.*, p. xxii-xxiii passim.

on the basis of relations of power'.[247]  This was not just a shift in method but more a recognition that space was fundamental in his inquiry—like Henri Lefebvre he came to see space as the 'underpinning'.[248]  Thus, in *Discipline and Punish*, in his celebrated treatment of Bentham's panopticon—a tower for viewing the lunatic, patient, school boy or factory worker without the observer being seen (except by observers of a higher rank)—the architectural vision was conceived of as something beyond a utopia or a specific technology: the panopticon was a diagram beyond any specific use.[249]  Gilles Deleuze explores this approach, describing a 'diagram' as,

> a map, a cartography that is coextensive with the whole social field.  It is an abstract machine. … It is a machine that is almost blind and mute, even though it makes others see and speak.… It makes history by unmaking preceding realities and significations, constitution hundreds of points of emergence or creativity, unexpected conjunctions or improbable continuums.[250]

Deleuze's exposition is perhaps heavy-handed—and it is not difficult to see why those more humanistic-minded scholars would read a certain imperialism into such a claim—but he was concerned to show the emergence of a new mode analysis in Foucault's later work, a slipping of his moorings in *knowledge* and a voyage towards other spaces.[251]  In this we find a resonance with the work of Henri Lefebvre and his description of *l'espace vécu,* 'actually lived and socially created spatiality, concrete and abstract at the same time, the habitus of social

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[247] Michel Foucault, 'Questions on Geography,' in Colin Gordon (ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 69-70.

[248] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 404.

[249] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 170

[250] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, pp. 34-35 passim.

[251] Foucault had, at this stage, resolved to remain on the surface of things in order to avoid the suggestion of a core or essence to what he was describing and, instead, to

practices, ... a space rarely seen for it has been obscured by a bifocal vision that traditionally views space as either a mental construct or a physical form'.[252]

For Lefebvre, all social relations remained abstract and unrealised unless they were expressed in concrete ways— for example, he asks: 'What would remain of the Church if there were no churches?'[253] Thus, *l'espace vécu* does not simply refer to the space of planners and architects, physical objects and 'material culture', the spaces in literary works, or to the activities of interested agents. Even in his short analysis of the city of Venice, one may see Lefebvre paying attention to texture, to death, to the manner in which Venice took on a unity beyond any intent—above all else, behind Venice lies production. Contemporary ethnographic approaches that have employed Foucauldian approaches and the work of Lefebvre have consistently recognised space as production in this broad sense.[254]

### The Ethnography of Vietnamese-Irish Space

Theoretically, one may read again, with fresh eyes, some classical anthropological accounts, from 'familism' in the West of Ireland to transnational ancestor veneration amongst overseas Chinese or the concept of *Nha* in a village in Vietnam, and appreciate such accounts as attempts to get to grips with space. The cultures described ethnographically are in many ways radically different

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repeat Deleuze's remark, allow one to see 'points of emergence or creativity, unexpected conjunctions or improbable continuums'. See *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[252] Quoted in Edward W. Soja, 'History: Geography: Modernity,' p. 119. In discussing enshrining I am also asserting the manner in which time extends lived space and allows it to be produced through the work of memory and the imagination.

[253] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* p. 44.

[254] See Adam Smith and Nicholas David, 'The Production of Space and the House of Xidi Sukur', *Current Anthropology,* vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), pp. 441-471.

from one another, yet there is a similar process in operation, a process of making social relations concrete in *l'espace vécu* — enshrining.

However, by discussing 'enshrining' I am not suggesting a core or an essence to such production. On the contrary, it is precisely its diffuse and fragmentary nature that I wish to draw out. Nor am I arguing that space may be understood dialectically or as merely 'contested', though conflict and contestation surely has a role to play. In Vietnamese-Irish life, the public realm of the nation-state—called 'outside culture' by some—, the hard-to-see arenas of home and the diasporic places of the 'community' do not add up to constitute space alone. By thinking about space much more is being conveyed. Inside Vietnamese-Irish homes, themselves tattooed with the markings of wider forces, the ethnographic question most obviously posed is: how does power and knowledge, and space and time hang together in the texture of everyday life?

Migrant populations tell us much about the power and limits of the nation-state, often because such populations, who seem not to belong, feel the heavy hand of governmentality. The early resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in Ireland, their dispersal to various parts of the country, and their subsequent remigration conditioned their connectivity to one another and to wider Irish society. The tendency of the Vietnamese-Irish to enter into the 'Chinese' takeaway business, with its particular pattern of livelihood and unattended presence on the national landscape, has shaped the profile of this population as surely as the structure of education, language provision and support has also played an important role. One of the consequences of these broad forces has been to intensify the transnational aspects of life for this minority. Such structural aspects of life, with their seemingly antagonistic forces, have had great

effect on the form of Vietnamese-Irish families. This form is, doubtless, contested and differently articulated depending on one's positions, in terms of gender, age, ethnicity or wealth; as a wife, a child, a father, a respected community leader or a poor takeaway worker, for example. In previous chapters, I have also drawn particular attention to aspects of their lives that articulate the connectivity between Ireland and the wider *Viet Kieu,* which are as diverse as ancestor worship, physical movement or the spaces of memory and the imagination. This diversity, I have argued, is often seen in something so simple and everyday as home videos. My argument here is that in lived space, in *l'espace vécu,* all of this hangs together through the productive process of enshrining. In this, the sheer physicality of a home that is clearly different from those that surround it, the concreteness of the ancestral shrine within it, or a community centre or takeaway business has a role to play. So also do the various identities and ideological perspectives of Vietnamese-Irish people who shape the world around them just as they are shaped by it. But enshrining, as the productive process of allowing things to hang together, goes beyond this. Perhaps, by having both a matter-of-factness and a certain quality of simulation, home videos articulate the work of enshrining particularly well.

The young Vietnamese-Irish woman who worried about her future and brooded over whether she should try to accommodate herself to an ill-fitting career, chose to work in a family business that she was sure would entrap her or emigrate to kin in the Unites States, discussed her options with me while we watched a visual audit of her relatives' lives. This home video version of 'walking the land' was just one of the ways through which dispersed kin seemed able to collapse space and allow the seemingly distant lives of relatives hold

together in a meaningful and proximate social world.  Thus, an abstract notion of family and diaspora, a sense of shared past and of future hopes was realised and mediated by a contemporary technology.  This ethnographic vignette gains its importance from the recognition that home videos do a cultural form of work in Vietnamese-Irish life.  Like the ancestors' altars that are themselves implicated in the same process, videos seem to run the length of this minority's experiences and connect them up to the wider world of the *Viet Kieu*.

When absent relatives cannot be physically present at a family *giỗ* the lens of the camera allows the far away a window onto the immediacy of events; in such celebrations the dead and the histories of the past are brought into the present through the ritual being recorded.  Watching a family video of a celebration that holds together extended families stretched out across thousands of miles, people of differing status and social position, generation and gender, in such a way as to celebrate the present while evoking the past, the dead and the culture of a far away land is both disconcerting and revealing.  One may unpack such productions for their various components and analyse each separately, but in trying to piece them together again in order to explain their essence we feel, to borrow from Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers'.[255]  This is because there is a tendency to miss the most obvious feature of how power and knowledge, and time and space, are held together in such situations—what one witnesses through the lens of a home video is what Vietnamese-Irish people do, the spatial underpinning of what they do, and how what they do is extended over time in what seems to be a coherent way.   Home videos are as much a form of enshrining as ancestors' altars are.  They are not

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[255] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 6.

just a part of lived space; they *are* lived space. Therefore, the search for the essence of enshrining brings one on an illusionary journey. Like the terrible secret that Michel Foucault discovered in *Death and the Labyrinth*, the more we try to get below the surface the more 'the mirror deepens in secrecy'.[256]

Following Lefebvre, one may argue that space is often conceived of as being transformed into lived experience by a social 'subject', governed by a variety of determinants and positions. This representation, he argues, subtends the notion of a space 'in which the interested parties, individuals or groups, supposedly dwell and have their being'. 'Of any actual historically generated space, however,' he notes, 'it would be more accurate to say that it played a socialising role ... than that it was itself socialised.'[257] It is this more dynamic role for space, beyond the subject, that we also find in Foucault's work. And, here I suggest that enshrining is the productive process that exists in the intermediary, though fundamental, realm that connects the empirical orders of 'home' with the abstract orders which explain what 'home' is and why it is here and nowhere else. Enshrining is the name one may legitimately give to processes in people's lives that suggest coherence, stability and, indeed, serenity amid conditions of change, instability and flux.

In *The Quiet American* Graham Green arrested the novel's narrative whenever the opportunity presented itself to discuss one of South Vietnam's more interesting religious/military sects, the Cao Dai. One may imagine literary

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[256] Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth* (London: Athlone Press, 1986), p. 2.
[257] See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 190. Indeed, Lefebvre echoes aspects of Foucault's approach in *The Order of Things* when he argues: 'The object of knowledge is, precisely, the fragmented and uncertain connection between elaborated representations of space on the one hand and representational spaces on the other; and this 'object' implies (and explains) a *subject* – that subject in whom lived, perceived and conceived (known) come together within a spatial practice.' *Ibid.*, p. 230.

critics attributing this to the ever-present theological themes that haunt his work. However, Green also saw something in the obvious bricolage of Cao Dai philosophy that said something about the *universus* of religion. As he walked his readers through the Cao Dai 'Holy See' at Tanyin, through the space of a belief system that 'domesticated' Victor Hugo, Christ, Buddha and Sun-Yat-Sen as saints, he noted

> The dragons with lion-like heads climbed the pulpit: on the roof Christ exposed his bleeding heart. Buddha sat, as Buddha always sits, with his lap empty. Confucius's beard hung meagrely down like a waterfall in the dry season. This was play-acting: the great globe above the altar was ambition: the basket with the movable lid in which the pope worked his prophecies was trickery.

'How', he wondered, 'could one explain the dreariness of the whole business: the private army of twenty-five thousand men, armed with mortars made out of the exhaust-pipes of old cars ...'[258] The author also posed the question of how it could be that, given the passage of time, and the marks left by human interaction with such a space, this invention, this contrivance and obvious bricolage could take on a sense of stability, permanence and convincingness? This question may also be answered by thinking about enshrining; but to return from 1950s Southeast Asia to present-day Ireland and the lives of the Vietnamese-Irish with lessons learned is to take away a sense that the concreteness of the Cao Dai cathedral at Tanyin is only a part of what is meant when we think in terms of the spatial underpinning of culture. Space is more relational, and the Vietnamese-Irish spatialisation that I have discussed refers as much to something adaptable and portable as to something fixed and rooted—but it is nonetheless convincing for this.

This chapter has been an extended essay suggesting that the answer to that question must properly be formulated by extending the spatial turn anthropologically, paying attention to the diagrams of social forces that are found in all societies, cultures and, indeed, amongst all minorities. This is so because a diagram becomes definable through the conditions that derive from dwelling together in a particular home or space, even a transnational one. A spatially minded analysis may uncover the points of change, emergence or creativity as well as the disjunctures and differences. The way, *par excellence*, through which such an analysis may proceed, is attention to how cultures enshrine. In Foucault's own writing a shift in thinking, method and style was necessary to draw out spatial work; work in space must be described first, elaborated and revealed. What one might mistake as order and the ideal for how people live their lives might just as easily simply be what they do.

But deriving tools with which to understand how space, power, knowledge and memory are set in the lived space of people's lives is crucial to this work, because I have been exploring how and in what ways do Vietnamese-Irish people belong. I have suggested a sort of map that may be discerned between the world in which they live and the way they express, idealise and memorialise that world. There is nothing static in this analysis. Culture is a word for both stability and change. The following chapter on the second generation explores the conditions for the possibility of the types of changes that may affect Vietnamese-Irish people. As I noted above, Henri Lefebvre once asked: 'What would remain of the Church if there were no churches?'[259] When considering the second generation Vietnamese-Irish one must ask what will

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[258] Graham Green, *The Quiet American*, pp. 85, 91 passim.

remain of the contemporary configuration of Vietnamese-Irish life when that configuration and its spatial underpinning is called into question by the passage of time and by new generations relating differently to the 'Vietnamese-ness' of their identity.

[259] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 44.

**Chapter 6: The Second Generation**

When one talks about a second generation in migration studies one is commonly referring to the children of at least one foreign-born parent in a given country. For example, the children of an Irish emigrant to New York may be regarded as second-generation Irish-Americans. Often the same labels are used when discussing ethnic identity, depending, of course, on a variety of variables. In migration studies, however, the notion of a second generation is employed, in the first instance, to analyse population movements rather than ethnic identification. Simply put, by talking in terms of second-generation Irish-Americans we are tracing connections to people who migrated from Ireland in the 1950s, for example, and hypothetically linking the cultural world of '50s Roscommon to the world of contemporary Manhattan. Epistemological problems flourish in such research areas, and one must not lose sight of the fact that the questions one may ask of data often generates the answers one finds, as Martin Heidegger famously warned: 'Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought.'[260] How people identify themselves may not have a straightforward relationship to population movements and, indeed, may have a profound influence on how movements are recorded. In the Vietnamese-Irish example I am interested in population movement and in identity. These two interests intersect with a variety of other variables, and the patterns that I suggest may be observable are contingent on a great many conditions of possibility. What follows is an attempt to sketch out those

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[260] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. 25.

conditions of possibility while, at the same time, maintaining a focus on movement and on identity.

It is difficult to sketch the outline of the second generation from amongst the Vietnamese-Irish population despite their relatively small numbers. As noted earlier in this text, the 1979-2000 figures published by the former Refugee Agency suggest that the majority of the population arrived in Ireland through the Family Reunification Scheme, as secondary admissions. This would suggest that many young adults were born in Vietnam or, perhaps, in refugee camps and that they migrated to Ireland after 1979. If we categorise those who were born in Ireland and those who were born in Vietnam and elsewhere as one group then we may be able to discern numbers and broad patterns but we may miss many aspects of identity, history and everyday life.

My own data, drawn from a sample 527 individuals, indicates that there are 279 persons of 35 years of age or less within this sample; 136 are between 25 and 35 years of age; 79 are 18 – 24 years old, and 64 are under 18 years of age. Of course the cut off point for this discussion, 35 years of age, is somewhat arbitrary as it is based on qualitative experiences. For example, there appears to be a pattern of late marriages among those who were born in Vietnam or in refugee camps before 1979 and who then migrated to Ireland as children. By extending the cut off point for this discussion to 35 years of age it becomes possible to look briefly at this trend. Also, the relatively small numbers under 18 years of age suggest that the sample is not as representative as it might be. Even in such a small population it is difficult to keep track of every new addition. Of those individuals of 35 years of age or less, the ones who were born in Ireland are easy to discern in the data. They were born in late 1979 or afterwards and

have names like Kim, Tiffany or Vincent—there are even one or two Erins—whereas their older siblings retain more traditional names such as Tuyen, Tuyet or Phuong, as do those who migrated to Ireland as children during the 1980s and 1990s.[261] This trend is most evident amongst ethnic Vietnamese but, broadly, it does seem to act as a marker and make a statement about buying into the idea of being Irish. One may also reasonable speculate that the majority of those Vietnamese-Irish individuals who are under 18 years of age and a sizable proportion of those aged 18 years or over (but less that 25 years old) are in full-time education. For those aged between 25 and 35 years of age, i.e. those born outside of Ireland, the common trend is towards involvement in 'Chinese' restaurant and takeaway businesses. Thus, age, country of birth and ethnic identification all play off one another in complex ways within this small population.

Another crucially important variable for the second generation, as indicated earlier in this work, is the manner in which representatives of the various generations play out their identity in the home and through the ways through which home life extends into other domains. For example, the following is a comment made by a Vietnamese-Irish man on the topic of education:

> My eldest kid is nearly 30. He was born in Vietnam. I have 3 boys and one youngest girl of 12. The two youngest children are in school. The eldest, he starts working now in the takeaway. I just let him try. Younger one is in final year: he going to college in year. Other boy doing Leaving Cert.
> This concerns me: my kids tell me that they wouldn't like when they grow up to be in Ireland. When they get a job they tell me they want to go somewhere else. They getting on in Ireland very well, they have

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[261] It is not uncommon in large families for some siblings to have been born in Vietnam and some to have been born in Ireland. This has often led to different ethnic identification within one household.

friends here you know. To me it is a different culture. Ireland, it changes, I think it changes even from when I come here. I don't know what the Irish do, but I say to my kids what ever you do you have to do well in school because that's your own future, not for me but for you. But unfortunately my eldest son he never like school and he always want to work. He was only a kid when he came to Ireland but he thinks he is Vietnamese. I would love to take my ... him to Vietnam to see. He like to go to see what it's like and he wants to see how different it is—people eating snake and that kind of thing. My other kids speak English; they have Dublin accents, just like the Irish. I not worry about their English; I worry about their own language. They cannot speak Vietnamese.

The simple metaphor of hyphenation does little justice here, as even within one family we may see a broad spectrum of identities obtaining. Moreover, before beginning a discussion of the second generation it is important to note some of the problems in social analysis in which the notion of generations is used. As the above quotation illustrates, generations do not face off against one another across the hyphen in the label Vietnamese-Irish; rather, there are considerable nuances to be found, as parents, young adults and children creatively live their lives in a dynamic society. One must avoid the cartoon-like images of 'culture clash' and of children growing up 'between two worlds'—the biographies of Vietnamese-Irish people do not tell of migrants from a traditional culture, and young Vietnamese-Irish people rarely convey the impression that they are suffering from an identity crisis. There is not just two worlds for Vietnamese-Irish people, sealed into their own particularity; rather the 'Vietnamese' and the 'Irish' infest one another. And, what of the culture that is now, ostensibly, on the far side of the hyphen? The notion of a fixed and essential Irish culture, just like the notion of an unproblematic Vietnamese culture, stands up to little scrutiny. For radical journalists, French scholars and American anthropologists, Vietnamese culture extended downwards from the people themselves, into the depths of the land, belief and even myth, just as the poet Patrick Kavanagh once caustically

described the typically rooted Irish peasantry who rhythmically worked the soil as being themselves part vegetable.

The notion of cultural conflict maps directly onto the notion of intergenerational conflict. In a great variety of texts within migration studies and in popular culture the ethnic minority family is often seen as a site of conflict between cultures, world views, the forces demanding adherence to tradition and the forces demanding change, as if the minority family is in need of therapeutic intervention *a priori*. However, one may well ask whether the tensions found in Vietnamese-Irish homes are of a greater level or intensity than those found in the majority of homes in a city like Dublin and whether the issues over which conflicts arise are particular to those homes? For example, one Vietnamese-Irish father was clear that arguments in his household had as much to do with the neighbourhood in which he was residing as anything 'cultural' in the narrow sense:

> There is so much drinking here, and the area I live in has drug-taking as well. When they [*those of his children who are in their twenties*] go out and have a drink to get on with their friends, I get worried because there is so much drinking and drug taking. I always tell my kids to remember that their parents are the most important thing—when they go out drinking we stay up late worrying about them. They have to contact us. It is difficult for them because they want to have something of their own. My boy is over 18 and he wants to do what he wants ...

I began to discuss this theme in chapter four when quoting the words of May, a young mother living in a fairly disadvantaged Dublin City suburb. She suggested that her children did not develop many problems with neighbourhood children primarily because they did not interact with them. My kids are 'not open wide in themselves' and they 'don't make friends easily,' she remarked. But she also noted that the neighbourhoods in which many Vietnamese-Irish

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people still reside are 'not so nice' and they 'don't let the children play there'.

Therefore, this has little to do with any innate dispositions in her children and

more to do with the manner of their upbringing, socialisation and the values that

they have learned—simply put, many Vietnamese-Irish children are raised in a

manner that is perceived by themselves and others to differ substantially from the

upbringing of their neighbours. Here we have ethnicity working out as different

value systems sharing the same spaces. Such values sometimes manifest

themselves in what may appear to be superficial biases, such as the often-

repeated stereotype amongst women that 'only prostitutes smoke,' and such

values also manifest themselves in the concrete rules that govern houses, such as

one man's 'zero tolerance' approach to 'sleepovers'.[262] But values, for young

Vietnamese-Irish women for example, are not built upon the rules governing

your freedom to spend a night away from home or upon how you think you look

with a cigarette. These examples are just two manifestations of a set of

relationships, and innumerable interpretations of whether it is cool to smoke or

justifiable to 'sleepover' with friends or a partner are possible, because, as

Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us, 'there is a way of grasping a rule which is not

an interpretation, but which is exhibited ... in actual cases'.[263] Therefore, in

order to understand values and difference for an ethnic minority we need to trace

connections across a number of domains.

One must also be careful in case discussions of neighbourhoods, ethnicity

and social differentiation leads in the direction of a class-based analysis, which is

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[262] The stereotype regarding women who smoke may be related to the availability of both prostitutes and cigarettes in War-time Saigon. In 1945 the population of Saigon was estimated at 500,000; in 1975 the population of Saigon was an estimated 4 million, and somewhere between 250,000 and 500,000 women worked in the sex industry.
[263] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* p. 201.

often the approach taken to analyse mobility within ethnic minorities in European cities. Such a broad tool can do little justice to people's lives, which often play out in very subtle ways. John-Paul Sartre once commented on the tendency of class-based analysis to drain the social world of its creativity, its delicate differences and its lifeblood, and leave behind anaemic-looking proletarians and washed-out members of the bourgeoisie. In his famous 'differential' Sartre pointed out that to Marxists the poet Valéry was merely a petit-bourgeois intellectual, but not all petit-bourgeois intellectuals were Paul Valéry.

This work has been an attempt at cultural analysis from many different angles, such as home life, memory and diaspora. My intention has been to suggest that a form may be revealed in Vietnamese-Irish life that suggests a central role for the family. This form draws on the past, on memory and even on sentiment, and its enshrining is as much based on the conditions that exist in Ireland as on anything that one may describe as 'traditional' Vietnamese culture.[264] In many ways, 25 years after the first arrival of Vietnamese programme refugees in Ireland, cooperatively generating a cultural history of Vietnamese-Irish life more fitting that it may at first seem. To many Vietnamese-Irish people the 'culture' that exists for them here in Ireland is in transition. A clue to this transition is to be found not in a study of class but, rather, in a study of how the form of family and home life found in Ireland over the last 25 years has brought with it its own cultural gravediggers.

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[264] Nazli Kibria, in *Family Tightrope* has argued that, 'Vietnamese-Americans strove to preserve the traditional Vietnamese family system partly because of its significance to their economic lives and future'. See Nazli Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese-Americans* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 10.

The father, quoted above, who stayed up late worrying about his 18-year-old son socialising in a neighbourhood in which drinking and drug-taking was common reflected that both he an his wife were under no illusions that the world in which their children lived would mean a great many changes in the years to come:

> I wouldn't think in my children's homes there will be anything to say, 'I am Vietnamese,' because the culture is changing. They go out with their friends – stuff outside of the family. Other parents, they say the same.
> ...
> I want my kids to have success in the future. I cannot force them to marry Vietnamese. There will be a lot of change in the next generation. You cannot stop that.

Interestingly though, when pressed further on what he meant when he used the notion of a changing culture it turned out to be the particular configuration of family life since migration to Ireland that he was describing. Family many well be a site of intergeneration conflict, if one were to take a narrow focus, but it may also, more commonly, be the site upon which change is experienced and creatively engaged with. Though Vietnamese-Irish people would rarely imagine the family as a perfectly harmonious unit, informants quoted throughout this work have, nonetheless, variously described their families as a 'culture' and as a network. The network-like form of the Vietnamese-Irish family may not be all pervasive and, indeed, may be contingent on particular conditions of possibility, but it also seems to be one of the ways thorough which change is managed and often embraced. To wish for a good education and a promising career for your children is, as many Vietnamese-Irish parents are only too aware, also to wish for your children to transform themselves. The paradox here is that the wish for transformation is accompanied by a desire that the change will not be absolute or

at the expense of keeping intact the 'good' aspects of your culture life. How Vietnamese-Irish people work through this paradox is a good example of the complexity at the core of something imagined to be straightforward—cultural change.

**The Generation in the Middle**

In many ways there is no smooth transition across the hyphen or between generations, and certainly no straight line towards assimilation. One of the more interesting ways through which this might be explored is through a discussion of those young Vietnamese-Irish persons who were born outside of Ireland and who often regard themselves as culturally different from those who are younger than them, even within their own families. By way of illustration, here are the words of one young Vietnamese-Irish man:

> I see that most of the younger persons are going to get married to Irish people. Just because when they go to school they make friends with Irish people ... they behave like Irish people, they act like Irish people, they even associate with the Irish people, everything they do is more like normal Irish people, because of the life and the integration they have has to be Irish.
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> I think that Vietnamese people marrying Irish people is quite normal and that there is nothing wrong with that. ... But in my generation a couple of people married Irish people, but the marriages went bad. They not long last. It worries me. In my generation it's two different cultures.

This young man is Tan, the successful single professional whose biography I drew from previously. Here he is suggesting a vend-diagram-like distinction between the generations with himself as representative of a hybrid overlapping of the cultural circles. There are a number of case studies that could be used here to illustrate how certain marriages 'went bad'. However, it would be inappropriate

to provide anything more than rudimentary details. Certainly an important trend has been that marriages between Vietnamese-Irish women and 'Irish' men seem, qualitatively, to have rarely resulted in separations, as compared to the frequency of separation in marriages between Vietnamese-Irish men and 'Irish' women. There are a number of interesting issues here. For example, Vietnamese-Irish people have suggested to me that this trend is based on the synergy and the conflict between what are regarded as the intersecting values encapsulated in Asian and Western gender roles. Vietnamese historians have long pointed to the relative equality between genders in pre-colonial Vietnam, as evidenced by the legal rights of Vietnamese women to share in the parental inheritance from the family of their birth (the natal *ho*). Also, the notion of the Vietnamese 'woman of the house' as *nội trưởng* (the 'general within' or the 'chief of the interior'), a status often assigned to powerful elderly women who in some families often out rank the male heads of household units, is suggestive of gender roles that are not easily measured against a universal yard stick. Nonetheless, some younger generation women have noted that the subtle rather than open influence that their mothers exercise within the home has influenced their being less inclined towards taking an openly strong stance on equality within their own relationships. One Vietnamese-Irish woman who was born in Vietnam reflected that when she was growing up her home was not just marked off as different by the presence of an ancestors' altar, Asian food and statues to Buddha; her home was also a place in which her mother worked in the kitchen and expected her daughters to assist in household chores: 'It's different in the house alright. I used to notice how I helped my mother in the house, but in my friends' houses they never seemed to do that,' she said.

Passing reference and innuendo hardly qualify as evidence, but on the reasons why there is a high frequency of separation in marriages between Vietnamese-Irish men and 'Irish' women it might well be interesting to explore the question of gender roles further. Nazli Kibria, in *Family Tightrope,* has argued that migration to the United States opened opportunities for work (beyond what was termed *việc không có tên,* or the work with no name) and socialisation for Vietnamese-American women, and that these opportunities have torn at a sense of 'tradition', which has often been promoted by both men and women. Some men who spoke to Kibria felt a loss of status. According to one young man: 'Here the woman is the king, and the man holds a position below the pets.'[265] Kibria's research suggested that failure to match the societal, social and personal demands for success amongst Vietnamese-American men opened wounds that were aggravated by the comparative successes of partners. Further and more detailed research is needed if one is to move beyond the speculation that for Vietnamese-Irish men who were born in Vietnam similar tensions are arising.

Throughout several years of ethnographic research I encountered no sense that Vietnamese-Irish people saw marriage between their kindred and 'Irish' people as anything other than normal. Instead, criteria such as family background, education and 'prospects' seemed to come into play. Neither did families seem to dominate marriage choices. Yet, amongst the 'generation in the middle' that I now discuss, the choice of spouse did seem to be influenced by the family.

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[265] See Nazli Kibria, *Family Tightrope*, p. 108.

One has to recall that under the Family Reunification Scheme, spouses of Vietnamese refugees have an automatic entitlement to come to Ireland to join their family, 'in recognition of the difficulties faced by such a small community in finding potential marriage partners from within their own ethnic group in Ireland'.[266] These have been instances of young Vietnamese-Irish men (in particular) travelling to Vietnam and getting married there. I have also seen evidence of the wider *Viet Kieu* forming a horizon of potential marriage partners. The words of Tan are again helpful here. He pointed out that marriage choices for those born in Ireland are often structured differently to those for their older siblings, due to variables ranging from age to spatial proximity:

> You see the population is *so small* among Vietnamese people around here that it is very difficult for them to find the right person, the right partner. In order to find a partner, you have to be a teenager and not older. For a lot of teenagers, other Vietnamese people are scattered around the city and they are not allowed just get on a bus and go to Tallaght or Clondalkin, so they meet people at school and at home in their areas. Every time you go out you have to ask parents and all that – it is difficult for young Vietnamese people to find a Vietnamese person to be their partner. If you think about the New Year's party for example, young people may meet, but when will they see each other again? Next year?

For the 'generation in the middle', with several exceptions, there is a strong pattern of gaining employment in the 'Chinese' restaurant and takeaway business. The reasons for this may vary from individual to individual; however, the trend towards employment in the restaurant and takeaway business may well be a result of experiences in the education system and labour market segregation. In terms of experiences of the education system one must recall the work of Frieda McGovern on the first 10 years of resettlement in Ireland.

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[266] Cathal O'Regan, *Report of a Survey of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities*, p. 7, and Refugee Agency, 'Information Bulletin' (Dublin: Refugee

In 1981 over 60 Vietnamese children were of compulsory school-going age, 39 boys and 23 girls, ranging in age from 5 to 15 years. According to the Refugee Resettlement Committee's Annual Report for 1986, 'the problems increase in ratio with the children's ages. Many of the children are in classes two years below that which they should be'.[267] There was an almost complete absence of additional language support, resulting in what Frieda McGovern has described this as a sink or swim policy.[268] In the late 1980s she carried out research in four secondary schools in the areas of Dublin in which Vietnamese refugees were residing and concluded that of the '18 Vietnamese pupils between the ages of 12-18 in the study areas in 1989, 1 was in another secondary school, approximately 5 were in primary schools, and the rest had left the mainstream system, the vast majority of these without qualifications'.[269] When asked what the future might hold for them, one teacher said, 'Not good for this generation.'[270]

The majority of those pupils who were in McGovern's study sample are now in their late 20s and early 30s. Some emigrated and then returned to Ireland; others emigrated and did not return; while the majority of those who remained in Ireland work in the takeaway business. I have come to know several of these young people and while many are prospering and have become owners of several businesses, others have noted that life is difficult in 'the chippers', but few options are available to them.

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Agency, 1993).
[267] Refugee Resettlement Committee, 'Report on Refugee Resettlement for 1986,' paragraph 2.2.
[268] Frieda McGovern, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Ireland, 1979-1989,' p. 196.
[269] *Ibid.,* p. 205.
[270] *Ibid.,* p. 211.

### The Younger Generation

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Franz Fanon asks readers to think about how the weight of history, power and 'race' influence how people interact with one another. According to Fanon, in the French colonial world of, for example, Indochina or Martinique, Francophone civilisation took on the status of a tabernacle for all that was perceived to be good. When colonial subjects made pilgrimages to France they experienced a kind of *déjà vu* in this intimate yet foreign land. And when they travelled they did so in Parisian clothes, and they spoke with what they believed to be *haut*-bourgeois accents. Soon their carefully practiced words and their clothes from ten seasons ago were stripped away to reveal the fact of their blackness:

> You are on a train and you ask another passenger: 'I beg your pardon, sir, would you mind telling me where the dining-car is?'
> 'Sure, fella. You go out door, see, go corridor, you go straight, go one car, go two car, go three car, you there.'[271]

Fanon was 'battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, "have a banana"', stereotypes with a past that spattered his whole body with black blood.[272] One option that some people chose was what he called 'lactification', an attempt to bleach one's self of one's self and of the history others have given to you, with a compound made from the history others have given to you. What the author was probing was the notion that there is something incorrigible about the correspondence between way people look and the myth of 'race'.

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[271] Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 35-36.
[272] *Ibid.*, p. xii.

For Vietnamese-Irish people from the younger generation their identity intersects with stereotypes throughout their lives. In simple terms, some younger people still find it difficult to persuade people who don't know them well that they are Irish—the 'yes, but where are you *from?*' syndrome. The majority of Vietnamese-Irish young people that I have met and interacted with prefer to answer such questions with responses like, 'from Clondalkin'. In the younger generation identity is seen as local first and foremost. The small size of the Vietnamese-Irish population and their association with the restaurant business has also lead to confusion: neighbours will point you in the direction of 'the Chinese' in a Dublin housing estate but stare at you blankly if you ask for help looking for a Vietnamese-Irish family. There are several domains in which it is possible to throw further light on the lives of Vietnamese-Irish young people, such as education, work and the home, and I will discuss each briefly.

**Identity at Work**

The discussion of stereotypes and, indeed, 'race' is most immediately relevant to the world of full and part-time work in the 'Chinese' takeaways and restaurants. The following are the words of a young Vietnamese-Irish woman:

> When I was in school I worked part-time in my family's restaurant—all the time really. It's the same with others in my family. My cousins, uncles, my father of course, sisters, brothers, they're all in the takeaways. All my brothers and sisters work part-time. Not that anyone complains: my cousin, like, she goes to college a good bit away and then when she comes home at the weekends she has to work. I started work when I was fairly young, just messing around really, behind, in the kitchen, and then, as I got older, I learned how to work out in the front at the counter and I did that for most of the time I was growing up. When I learned to drive I used to do the deliveries as well, or at least I used to help out. ...

Working on the counter was horrible at times. Some drunken people are ok, but some of them are just horrible really. There was this one guy, he was fairly old, and he used come in to the shop every day nearly. I didn't know him but I used to see him there all the time and he was always trying to get me to give him stuff for free. I'd say, 'I can't', and then he'd get all grumpy. But the worst thing is the kids: they're always hanging around. …

But you see that's where we work and make a living in our family, so no matter what the hassle is you just go back. One time when I was working some guy jumped the counter and robbed the place, after the police left we continued working and the next night I was back working at the counter—you just can't be scared of them. It's the same with the kids. I give out hell to them! They're always hanging around, and I just shout at them. Now most of the kids know not to try anything when I'm there. One night a friend of mine came in and said that she couldn't believe how different I was when I was at work—that I am normally so quiet. …

But you have to play them at their own game. When one starts messing—they're always in groups, and they never cause trouble on their own—I just cancel the order on all of them until they say sorry.

This young woman's confidence and ability, developed through years of experience, masks the dark side of working in the takeaway business. One should note her comment that this is her family's business and 'no matter what the hassle is you just go back'. While few Vietnamese-Irish people felt it appropriate to criticise their customers or to draw attention to problems in front of their siblings or parents, it would be naïve to assume that prejudice is unknown.

Again, home videos are interesting here. Many tapes that I have been shown are taken in restaurants or, more frequently, in takeaways. Those tapes that were shot late at night show life on the other side of the counter as being a constant negotiation with casual aggression and offensive comments. Therefore, while Vietnamese-Irish people see their identity on a curve from 'Coolock' to 'North-Sider' or 'from Dublin', the way others see them often disturbs this

perception and promotes a sense of difference. But to ascribe the formation of identity to racialisation would be to employ a tool just as blunt as any class-based analysis. A brief discussion of young Vietnamese-Irish people's experiences of education will add further detail.

**Identity in Education**

> I really enjoyed school. The kids were really nice. I think it was because I was different or something like that. They were much nicer to me. I seemed to get on with everybody. I didn't just fit in with any one group: I seemed to have friends in every group. I wasn't at the top of the class or anything in school. I used to keep to myself a lot as well and stay quiet. It was the same with my cousins they said that they got on well in school and that every one treated them well, and that they just kept to themselves mostly.

The above comment was recorded in a discussion with a 20-year-old Vietnamese-Irish woman who is now in third-level education. Her comment is fairly representative of the kinds of memories many young women of her age have of their school days. For a minority of Vietnamese-Irish children the education experience was much more harsh. Throughout several years of ethnographic fieldwork I have come across a small number of severe cases of bullying, and second-hand reports of some young people being isolated in schools. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that ethnicity was the determining force in all of these cases. One should also note that many young Vietnamese-Irish people would have grown up in neighbourhoods where they were the only members of an ethnic minority and they would have been the only minority members in school also. Yet, their language proficiency, accents and social skills would not have marked them off as different, as such. For young

Vietnamese-Irish people difference was physical—people thought they 'looked Chinese'.

What is interesting about the above comments by a 20-year-old Vietnamese-Irish woman extracted from my field notes is that it matches the words of other second-generation Vietnamese-Irish men and women: many talk about being treated well by others at school; most described themselves as being quiet and keeping to themselves, and while all seemed to make good friends in school they still retained the wider family as an important social resource. Looking back on what it was like to grow up in Dublin City schools in the 1980s and 1990s young Vietnamese-Irish men and women recall being treated differently but not badly. Stereotypes were certainly in play: others saw them as quiet, hardworking and different, and frequently they saw themselves in the same ways. The resource of the family was for many something that could be held in the background and something that enabled interaction with others to be rendered easier by the knowledge that family stood just out of view. Family, in this sense, was comprised of the cousins that one might meet at lunch time or walk to or from school with; family was the 'friends' that were both a part of the fabric of home life and a part of 'a system of potentialities', to borrow from Arensberg again, when negotiating with the wider world.[273] Sometimes coming to understand one's identity in relation to the world was not achieved through a dramatic crisis but, rather, through the mundane and the everyday, as the words of this young Vietnamese-Irish woman illustrates:

> My cousins lived next door, so I always saw my own home as being normal, because when I went to my friends I went to my cousins and their home was the same as mine. I did have friends in school, but I didn't

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[273] Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, p. 84.

think that their lives were that much different to mine – but I sometimes thought that they were afraid to come to my house because things were different there. There was different rules and different food in my house. And when I went to their house they were, like, 'are you ok with just sausages?' And I'd have to tell them, 'that's fine'.

For many young Vietnamese-Irish people school was a site where the first close relationships were formed with people who were outside of the family. Obviously, it was also a site were the first relationships with the opposite sex began. Two years ago I met a young Vietnamese-Irish man who was working in a takeaway business in Dublin's North Inner City. Subsequently he migrated to the United Kingdom. In a brief conversation about his childhood and school days he pointed out that many Vietnamese-Irish families use the resource of the family to maintain discipline, by getting siblings to check up on each other. When groups of boys and girls would delay going home from school to spend time with each other, word would inevitably reach his parents. 'They'd eyes all over the place,' he noted. 'It was like Big *bleedin'* Brother.' For others a sense of being 'good', particularly for Vietnamese-Irish girls, meant that relationships with the opposite sex were late occurring and regarded as something to be avoided in case 'trouble' was caused. One young man offered a less than moralistic explanation, however. He suggested that because neighbourhood were often 'bad', thus requiring children to go home straight from school, and because most spent their spare time in part-time work, even in adolescence most Vietnamese-Irish simply didn't have the time for a relationship. Thus, memories of rebellion often seemed to disappoint those who recalled them. Take the words of one Vietnamese-Irish woman:

My family did take a lot of interest in my school. They didn't check my homework or anything like that but they were always asking me what was

going on and how I was getting on. My parents were strict though. I remember them getting mad when I got my ears pierced.

When the same woman went away to study in a university in the West of Ireland she noted how the transition to the life of a student sharing an apartment with others involved a dramatic shift in lifestyle and in codes of behaviour. While for her fellow students 'chilling out' involved many hours of watching television or chatting, for her physical inactivity was difficult to get used to:

> There is a strong work thing as well in our families. Even when I was in college I couldn't sit still. The others in the house would be sitting around and watching TV and I'd be up and around and cleaning and stuff like that – I suppose I was handy to have around!

Somewhere between leaving school and completing third-level education most second-generation Vietnamese-Irish men and women who are in relationships met their partners. Invariably, partners are not Vietnamese-Irish. As one young woman commented:

> I have an Irish boyfriend. My parents are far easier than other parents. They don't mind me going out with an Irish boyfriend. In fact nobody really minds that. It's more to do with who they are, like, for my parents – like their background, their character and who they are.

One might confidently conclude, based on qualitative evidence and on the logical analysis of population numbers, that the majority of the members of the Vietnamese-Irish second generation will marry non- Vietnamese-Irish people. Where marriage to other Vietnamese-Irish or to Vietnamese people does occur it will either be rare or happen within the frame of the Vietnamese diaspora or *Viet Kieu*. Yet one needs to know much more if one is to make reasonable predictions

as to trends over the next few years or decades.  Again one may employ three sites of analysis: education, the takeaway business and family as home life.

**Prospects and Conditions**

As noted previously, my own data, drawn from a sample 527 individuals, indicates that there are 279 persons of 35 years of age or less within this sample; 136 are between 25 and 35 years of age; 79 are 18 – 24 years old, and 64 are under 18 years of age.  I know of no individuals under 18 years of age who are not in full-time education, and many of those aged between 18 and 24 years are in full-time third-level education.  Those who I know who are in full-time third-level education have tended, with few exceptions, to pursue courses of study in the sciences and in subject areas such as information technology, business and accounting.  This bias towards the more 'pragmatic' areas of study has often been influenced by the expectations of parents and their desire to see their children in professional careers.

However, few second-generation Vietnamese-Irish people that I have come to know have actually begun on a professional career path.  The weight of expectation placed on the educational system has not yet produced the results that so many Vietnamese-Irish parents have hoped for.  Many of those who have recently graduated from universities and colleges are seeking work, are in part-time employment before beginning post-graduate studies or are travelling to visit relatives in countries such as Australia.  Of course, there is nothing exceptional in this for second-generation Vietnamese-Irish people. It is common for third-level graduates to take up to 12 months before entering the workforce proper (when they do enter the workforce they tend to do so at a higher salary than those

without degrees).  Nonetheless, there is something troubling here.  Much of what the future is and means has been calculated *vis-à-vis* the prospect of children becoming professionals and being a 'success'.  Should the individuals concerned find difficulty in meeting such expectations or should the education system not take them in the desired direction quickly enough there will likely be severe problems.

Once again it is illustrative to trace out the biographical case study of Phuong, which I mentioned previously in this thesis.  Phuong was born in Vietnam and travelled to Ireland as an infant.  When I first met her she was 25 years old and unemployed despite a having acquired good degree in computer science.  She assured me that she had simply no idea what she wanted to do with her life.  Her father, she said, had pushed her towards educational achievement and into studying computing at university.  At that point in time her major concern was whether she would be able to secure professional work or be forced to continue working in the family's takeaway business.  It could be argued that her biography is that of the generation in the middle, but her biography is interesting to recall as it may end up sounding like the life stories many second-generation Vietnamese-Irish will tell in the years to come.  These trends are not full articulated in practice yet.  There is a holding pattern in evidence, and what trajectory is taken will be revealed with time.  For many second-generation Vietnamese-Irish the 'Chinese' restaurant and takeaway business has remained a feature of their lives.  While some will follow the path towards professional careers and work in business outside of the family, others will choose to make their living in the ethnic food niche, and some will have little choice.

**Back to Family**

A key question raised in any discussion of second-generation Vietnamese-Irish people's lives is that of the nature and extent of the cultural change that will occur in and through families. Throughout this work I have taken up the words of Vietnamese-Irish people and argued that family may be seen as a flexible and dynamic set of potentialities articulated through the way people live their lives. The form of the Vietnamese-Irish family acts as a diagram. One obvious 'cultural' way in which one may track change is through ancestor worship, itself a dynamic expression of family, as well as being the kind of mirror that would please Lacanian analysts. As culture is a synthesis of stability and change, one might suggest that ancestors will witness—I would also argue enshrine—broad shifts in family life. Below are the words of Kim a young Vietnamese-Irish woman on the topic of religion:

> My family are Buddhists but they sent me to a Catholic school. I even did my communion. Other Vietnamese-Irish girls did that as well, I know my cousin did. She said that she was Irish and all the Irish girls did it, so why not? Then the school wanted me to do my confirmation and I said, 'No, I can't, I'm Buddhist' – and that was the first they knew about it! My other cousins are Catholic as well. …
>
> I don't practice anything. The ancestors' thing is more social for me, but there's a bit of religion, we get everyone together that way … it's difficult to see people otherwise. I don't think there is any chance of having, like, an altar in my own home later. Maybe, if I married a Vietnamese person, I suppose. But, I have an Irish boyfriend and it'd freak him out. …
>
> I don't believe in anything really—but I do believe in this …
>
> [*She shows an amulet carved in the image of a female deity from the ancestors' shrine, which she wears around her neck*]
>
> My sisters wear these also—all the girls wear them—they are what we believe in. She is like a goddess, but more like an angel, because it's personal. I think that she protects me that she guides me when I need her. I think that most people believe what they believe because it's what's

around them, so if you grow up a Catholic you will probably believe that, but now there is no religion around and so people believe in personal things. So she's mine. ...

When sitting in the home of this young Vietnamese-Irish woman several years ago I spoke to her older sister, who was born in Vietnam, about the life her family was leading and what the future might hold for her. As I noted previously, she had an Irish boyfriend and saw herself as just being a young woman from Dublin. 'I'm Irish,' she said, '... except with my family, then I'm kind of Vietnamese.' 'So you're Vietnamese at home?' I asked. 'Yes, yes,' she said, 'inside it is Vietnamese food, and outside it's McDonalds'. Few would argue today that postmodernity has swept 'culture' and its associated values away and inaugurated the age of 'a tasteless, colourless fluid of uniformity', which Randolph Bourne feared would one day come.[274] If anything, there is currently an explosion in 'culture' and in claims to difference. One of the greatest challenges today is to rescue something from the notion of culture, where the use of the term does not denote static traditions and customs that seal identities into their own particularity. The young Vietnamese-Irish woman who described the threshold of her home as a passage from Vietnamese food to 'McDonalds' was not proposing a twofold world but rather a series of crossings, as she and her family differently and creatively negotiated a dynamic world. Were one to extend the frame of thinking once again then one might consider how the obviously cultural difference of the ancestors' altar passes the threshold of Vietnamese-Irish homes around the necks of young women as amulets carved in the image of a female deity. Such cultural practices make aspects of home life amenable to the 'outside' world in which these young women live much of their

everyday lives. A shrine amulet of a goddess is personal, it guides when needed, it is also 'cool' and contemporary to wear jewellery that has personal significance; and, wearing a shrine amulet is also 'traditional'. In the same way, inside the home, photographs of educational achievements on living room walls are both contemporary and traditional. And the ancestors' altar that occupies a section of the room is, *par excellence*, a living tradition—the evidence that it is alive is that it is, in certain ways, about to die. New practices of enshrining are now emerging.

When one thinks about the second generation one is forced to confront both the notion of culture itself and the manner in which cultural notions have become shoe-horned into easy models for the analysis of migration and ethnicity. In defiance of standard models of cultural change one may think about culture as the enshrining people do amid the conditions of history and space, power and knowledge. Rather than see certain objects, words, practices or ideas as markers of their becoming 'Irish' I have come to think that most Vietnamese-Irish people see their lives in more complex ways. Often this is articulated in words through expressions such as 'keeping traditions' and 'keeping memories' in the face of 'outside culture'. Often it is the family, variously described as a 'network' or a 'culture' that is the mechanism through which much of life is negotiated: 'family keeps whatever it can'. I have argued that objects, words, practices and ideas conform to a flexible notion of family that is in transition. This form, diagram or network is not sealed off to the world outside—it is a manifestation of wider conditions of possibility. Like the plague-riddled family in Edgar Allen Poe's

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[274] Randolph Bourne, 'Transnational America,' p. 89.

*The Mask of the Red Death,* who sealed themselves off from the world in case they got the plague, in this case too the outside is already inside.[275]

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[275] Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe,* (New York and London: Doubleday Books, reissue edition, 1966).

**Placing the Vietnamese-Irish: Concluding Remarks on Theory and Culture**

Every year Vietnamese-Irish people gather to celebrate the New Year's *Tết* festival. On the night before *Tết, Đêm Giao Thừa,* the head of the family invites the souls of the ancestors into the world of the living and, in so doing, brings the family together with a powerful and complex image of 'family', which is clearly enshrined in their lives. This is not a perfectly congruent social practice. West of Ireland families once prayed the 'Family Rosary' in the west room, and they did not live in a perfectly harmonious world either. Just like country children when standing before the Sacred Heart picture, it is probable that Vietnamese-Irish children try to look solemn before the ancestors' altar while thinking of other things that they could be doing. But young people also confront a fluid and contingent way of organising and thinking about the world on such occasions. Perhaps this occurs only in moments. Yet, there, as much as in part-time work in takeaways, in school or in relationships, they sort out what it means to be Vietnamese-Irish. The *Tết* celebrations themselves are also a way through which a sense of identity is articulated, an identity that is at one and the same time local and transnational, neighbouring and detached. A first impression of a Vietnamese-Irish *Tết* festival is formed by fusions, contradictions and unlikely juxtapositions: well-heeled young men and women chatting to each other in English, as older people converse in Vietnamese and, occasionally, in broken English; the food is Asian-Irish, the music Asian-Global.

To the concept-forming eye of the mind the scene is an understandable one. Here is an ethnic minority that has blossomed in Ireland over the past 25 years. The older generation were invited to Ireland in 1979 as programme

refugees. The stories behind their departure from Vietnam are nearly impossible to appreciate. Many suffered traumas through the loss of, quite literally, everything that they cherished. Some saw loved ones die, while and others had to leave loved ones behind. Escape from Vietnam in small and crowded boats introduced fresh dangers. In Ireland, the local people involved in the initial resettlement of refugees from Vietnam quickly learned what lay behind the headlines about floods of so-called 'Boat People'. One family, comprised of a mother and three children, was resettled in a town in the Midlands. Trust was built over time and, eventually, they told the story of their boat being boarded by Thai pirates in the South China Sea. To protect his wife from rape, the father of the family attempted to fight off the heavily armed pirates. He was murdered, and his body was thrown overboard. Shortly afterwards, the boat went into the doldrums, and three weeks later the man's body resurfaced alongside the boat, where it remained for many days. Yet, when one sees a Vietnamese-Irish *Tết* festival the impression one gets is one of people having overcome the past and having made a new life in a new home. To the concept-forming eye of the mind, here are people who have 'acculturated' or at least accommodated themselves to Irish life, and when one surveys the manners, speech styles and social attitudes of the younger generation one might even be persuaded that this ethnic minority is well on the way to being assimilated. People who were once strangers have stitched themselves into the fabric of a multicultural Ireland.

A thin description of Vietnamese-Irish people gathering to celebrate the New Year's *Tết* festival is both an appropriate starting point and an appropriate end point to this thesis. In order to understand the meaning of people's actions, manners and styles of dress, for example, one has to look not just at the history of

the resettlement process for the Vietnamese-Irish but also at aspects of their lives that range from residence patterns and memories to transnationalism and to home life. By looking at those aspects and at other issues, it quickly becomes clear that the common-sense manner through which we often seek to understand ethnic minority life is insufficient here. Instead of thinking in terms of how the Vietnamese-Irish 'example' fits with theories about acculturation, assimilation and 'strangers' it is, perhaps, more provocative to conclude by suggesting that none of these ideas are appropriate.

The problem may well be a simple one, and the solution may be just as straightforward. When thinking about minorities there is a tendency for walls to be build up to divide 'us' from 'them', to partition off a minority in order to ask important questions: in what ways does racism affect their lives, are they being excluded from full participation in society, and is their identity changing? These are some of the questions that have informed research on migration, ethnicity and minorities in Ireland and are similar questions to those that I have been raising in this thesis. However, by looking in some depth at Vietnamese-Irish lives through the eyes and in the words of the people themselves, I have consistently raised the suspicion that a more complex story needs to be told and that if this is to happen then some of the epistemological walls that have been constructed may need to be deconstructed.

In his most remarkable short story, *The Great Wall of China,* Franz Kafka describes the involvement of people in the construction of a monument to strangers. The wall was build to keep out the others, barbarians who could

potentially descend 'like locusts'.[276] Its effectiveness was questionable—it was

rumoured to be riddled with gaps. But the act of building the wall solidified

those involved into 'a ring of brothers, a current of blood no longer confined

within the narrow circulation of one body'.[277] Some walls are not physical, we

cannot see them, but they are real nonetheless. Kafka ended the story with the

terrible vision that to expose the Great Wall for what it was 'would mean

undermining not only our consciences, but what is far worse, our feet'.[278] In

order to conclude this thesis it may be necessary to further undermine our feet,

and I intend to do this my considering just two of the more significant ways in

which research on immigration to Ireland has been framed: scholarly accounts of

the acculturation of migrants, and contemporary thinking about multiculturalism.

Firstly, I will look at the idea of acculturation in terms of its history and,

secondly, I will take up some of the most interesting thinking on

multiculturalism. Throughout, I will reflect on how the analysis of Vietnamese-

Irish lives may provoke us into thinking about potential new ways to find our

feet.

**Acculturating Strangers**

Curiously, despite the wealth of literature on the Irish diaspora, research

informed by international migration studies has had little impact on cultural

study in Ireland.[279] Therefore, Irish culture has often been imagined from the

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[276] Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and other Stories,* trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 68.

[277] *Ibid.,* p. 70.

[278] *Ibid.,* p. 81.

[279] With a few exceptions, such as work in human geography and, of course, the research carried out in the Irish Centre for Migrations Studies in National University of Ireland, Cork.

navel outwards. It is, conceivably, no surprise then that responses to in-migration have been formed by scholarly attempts to address issues of racism, immigration policy and multiculturalism in ways that often seem disconnected from a consciousness of the history of migration and from the lives of ethnic minorities. An assimilating model of nationalism, which reached an apex in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with its complicit racialised world-view and embedded teleology, seems to have been resurrected in the narrative of a homogenous, white and Catholic country suddenly awaking to immigration in the late 1990s. In the instances where the lives of minorities have been inquired into, there has been a tendency to reach for off-the-shelf theoretical models to help explain cultural differences. My concerns are not abstract. The single most important research carried out on the Vietnamese-Irish is Cathal O'Regan's *Report of a Survey of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugee Communities in Ireland*. This report is professional, rigorous and empirically grounded. Unsurprisingly though, the data gathered on Vietnamese-Irish people is interpreted through the popular lens of acculturation, a move for which one may hardly fault the author. More broadly however, the recent and important volume *Cultivating Pluralism* is comprised of no less than five chapters that make substantial use of this same theoretical machinery.[280] Few, however, even glance at the history of this idea. To look at its history is not to journey into the dusty world of obscure epistemology: the library of acculturation theory is up-to-date and heavily used, yet why it exists at all is a mystery.

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[280] Malcolm MacLaughlin and Michael O'Connell (eds.), *Cultivating Pluralism: Psychological, Social and Cultural Perspectives on a Changing Ireland* (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 2000).

Acculturation theory is exemplified best in the work of psychologist John W. Berry, a contributing author to *Cultivating Pluralism.* Berry has defined the concept by returning to anthropologist Robert Redfield's famous 'Memorandum' from 1935.[281]  However, when one re-reads the 1935 Memorandum the striking thing is that, as an intellectual ancestor, it is not exactly a giant—at only three pages long it is, in fact, a bit short in more ways than one.[282]  According to Redfield *et al,* acculturation addressed the phenomena that result when groups of individuals with different cultures come into constant, first-hand contact.  The results were understood as acceptance, adaptation or reaction.  This simplistic model failed to impress many at the time. According to Gregory Bateson, for example, the idea of looking at two-group-contact was flawed because it presumed homogenous and stable communities that were not differentiated internally.[283]  Also, contact could often be imagined to occur in instances of violent interaction, such as colonialism: 'The laws of gravity cannot conveniently be studied by observation of houses collapsing in an earthquake,' he argued.[284]

Others were not so kind.  Alfred Kroeber had this to say in a survey of cultural

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[281] According to García-Vázquez 'Redfield, Lenton [sic] and Herskovits' [*sic*] (1936) definition has become most commonly used among researchers.' See Enedina García-Vázquez, 'Acculturation and Academics: Effects of Acculturation on Reading Achievement Among Mexican-American Students', *The Bilingual Research Journal,* vol. 19, 2, (1995), pp. 305-315.  See also The Social Science Research Council (Robert Redfield [chair], Ralph Linton and Melville J. Herskovitz), 'A Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation', *Man: A Monthly Record of the Anthropological Sciences,* XXXV, (October 1935), pp. 162-163; and J.W. Berry, 'The Acculturation Process and Refugee Behaviour' in C. L. Williams and J. Westermeyer (eds.) *Refugee Mental Health in Resettlement Countries* (Washington DC: Hemisphere, 1986), pp. 25-37.
[282] It is worth while noting that the Memo was not in fact a definition at all but, rather, a call for further research under agreed lines.
[283] His comment was intended as a broad-based critique of certain trends in anthropology, and he did recognise that the Memo would at least bring some clarity to this area through generating debate.  Gregory Bateson, 'Culture, Contact and Schismogenesis,' *Man: A Monthly Record of the Anthropological Sciences,* XXIV, (December, 1935), pp. 198-199.
[284] *Ibid.*

thought: 'If I say nothing about acculturation, it is because I find no novelties there. ... I do not know why these monotonous studies continue.'[285] In the 1930s acculturation came to be regarded as a pop science buzzword, not to be taken seriously. For the father of modern anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, the word itself seemed disgustingly reductive. He famously remarked that it sounded like a cross between a hiccup and a belch.

But even the man most accredited with designing the model of acculturation was more than aware of its limitations. Later in his career Robert Redfield pointed out some of the flaws in acculturation as a way of thinking and he suggested an alternative way forward. In the Huxley Memorial Lecture of 1955 he left a warning to future generations:

> I say only that [we] all share a disposition to find in each society or culture a total system that is discrete as well as complete, a total system that for the comparison at hand ends there, with that unit of representation.... But they that we study nowadays are in many cases neither complete nor discrete. They are incomplete and interdependent. They are, in fact, parts of compound systems ... historically recognisable larger systems.... The autonomous and perfectly congruent society and culture has been pulled apart and scattered abroad.[286]

Of course, acculturation theory can yield important results in the hands of exemplary researchers. However, I suggest that in its unquestioning deployment it has the capacity to erase the complexity of international migration, and I would argue that it carries with it a certain worldview that is at odds with contemporary trends. Robert Redfield's argument that 'the autonomous and perfectly congruent society and culture has been pulled apart and scattered abroad' acts as an early

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[285] Quoted in Ralph Beals, 'Fifty Years in Anthropology,' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 11, (1982), p. 14.

warning to those who see culture as something rooted to place.[287]  For those early

thinkers about migration to the United States, culture not only came from

somewhere in particular but it also disembarked still fairly intact at Ellis Island.

Redfield's work was intimately connected with that of Robert Park, the

father of assimilation studies in the United States.  To some commentators Park's

assimilation model, through which migrants gradually 'lost' their ethnicity in the

melting pot of the Americas, was overly simplistic, while for others his failure to

account for the forces that generated discrimination was damming.[288]  Just as

Robert Redfield was criticised for trying vainly to capture the complexities and

fluidities of migration and ethnicity in a simple theoretical container so too did

Park's contemporaries suspect that a more complex story could be told.  While

Park was writing about how minorities adapted to mainstream culture Randolph

Bourne was busy challenging people to stop thinking in 'narrow nationalistic

terms'.[289]  Today, attempts to understand transnationalism and diasporas are

being made by those attempting to picture a world of border crossings, in

defiance of those who has once pictured a world of borders, of acculturation,

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[286]Robert Redfield, 'Societies and Cultures as Natural Systems', *The Huxley Memorial Lecture, 1955*. Delivered at the Rooms of the Royal Society, Burlington House, W1, 22 March 1956. Printed in *Man,* vol. 85, issue ½, (1955), pp. 19-32.

[287]Robert Redfield, 'Societies and Cultures as Natural Systems,' pp. 19-32.

[288] However, considering 'race' did not alone prompt Nathan Glazer's recent question: is assimilation dead?'  Instead, 'New-Wave' migration has demanded a more complex approach.  The different forces behind this so-called 'New-Wave' have been addressed in the last decade's output from the *International Migration Review* and the *Journal of Refugee Studies.*  The emergent patterns are hard to ignore.  International population flows have changed in character, and whereas once, in America for example, it was a question of which migrants would assimilate most quickly, now it is a question of why migrants from China, Mexico, South East Asia or the Philippines seem not to assimilate at all?  See Nathan Glazer, "Is Assimilation Dead?" The Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science, 530, (1993), pp. 122-136; see also Alejandro Portes, 'Immigrant Theory for a New Century: Some Problems and Opportunities,' a special issue of the *International Migration Review,* Immigrant adaptation and native-born responses in the making of the Americas, Josh DeWind, Charles Hirschman and Philip Kasinitz (eds.), vol. XXX1, no. 4, (Winter 1997), pp. 799-826.

assimilation and the migration of 'strangers'. These terms are not value-free—rather they are covered with values. More than this, such terms indicate ways of thinking about the world that construct checkpoints at the borders of the imagination and establish watchtowers to gaze at those people who don't seem to fit. Yet to attack such constructions, 'would mean undermining not only our consciences, but what is far worse, our feet'.[290]

Villages in Italy loomed large for those who migrated from there to New York at the turn of the last century, just as County Clare loomed large for members of the Shanghai Police in the same era. Whether such connections were latent or active, involving mobility of the person or of the imagination is a matter for historical research. But one may not assume that all connections were severed at the border. It is difficult to argue that Vietnamese-Irish people form one Northern European chapter of a great diaspora—like 'culture', the word 'diaspora' cannot support the claims that are often made of it. For members of different generations and for members of different families the sense of their being a great overseas community somehow in exile works out differently, if at all. Many Vietnamese-Irish people travel 'home' to Vietnam frequently; some Vietnamese-Irish people make use of the multinational aspect of their families, for travel, work options, even for marriage partners. In Louis-Jacques Dorais's work in Montreal informants indicated that it was the family and not diaspora that was most important to them. This is true also for Vietnamese-Irish people; yet, large extended families do stretch from Sydney to Paris and Dublin and

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[289] Randolph Bourne, 'Transnational America,' p. 89.
[290] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

connect up businesses and spaces in a meaningful horizon—'a system of potentialities', to borrow from Conrad Arensberg yet again.[291]

An ancestors' altar in a Vietnamese-Irish home a diagram *par excellence* for thinking about many of the important issues raised here. They suggest connections to the past and to cultural difference: a past that was never as static as it was imagined to be, and a cultural difference that is not reflective of a 'perfectly congruent society'.[292] Such objects rest in rooms filled with seemingly antagonistic objects. To suggest that the lines that connect the dots of ancestors' altars, big-screen TVs and photographs commemorating educational achievement merely go together to form a rigid and deep system of 'family' is to miss the fluidity and nuances of the picture that does emerge. The picture that emerges is of people from various positions actively and creatively employing 'family' and other resources to engage with life in a dynamic society, and in so doing give coherence and stability to their world—this is the practice of enshrining. Twenty-five years have past since the first Vietnamese refugees arrived in Dublin Airport, and a generation of Vietnamese-Irish young people have come of age in Ireland. Family, conceived of as a network and as a culture—'because the culture is the family together'— is being memorialised and eulogised just as it seems to be slipping away. In this, one may see how enshrining extends over time.

Interrogating cultural thinking must inevitably lead to an interrogation of the ideology of multiculturalism. If the story of the last 25 years for Vietnamese-Irish people is to be placed then it must be placed in such a way as their important voices may be heard within society. One may think about

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[291] Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, p. 84.

multiculturalism by pointing to the work of its most articulate advocates, while at the same time recalling the voices of Vietnamese-Irish people and asking: in what way do their memories, sentiments and words provoke us to think differently. The most sophisticated work on multiculturalism in Ireland has been that which has drawn together the contemporary situation of migration, ethnicity and policy in Ireland with the age-old tradition of speculating on the notion of 'the stranger'.

While ontological speculation on the stranger is as old as the hills, in the social sciences the term became popular through the turn-of-the-century sociological writing of George Simmel. He lectured Robert Park in Berlin in 1899 (the only formal instruction in sociology Park ever had), and Park single-handedly mobilised the term 'assimilation' in the way that it is used today.[293] Park taught in the University of Chicago with the anthropologist Robert Redfield, a certain intellectual synergy existed between the two men and Redfield's became the name most closely associated with the term 'acculturation'. These few degrees of separation are more meaningful that they might first appear. These terms belong to the same cluster, and this cluster of terms has a sympathetic relationship to a certain worldview.

**Thinking about the Strangers**

> That borderline figure, who defines the limits of the human—customarily from the farther side, though never without some ambiguity—has been named variously the 'shadow,' the 'other,' the 'alien,' the 'outsider,' the 'stranger.'
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> – Leslie Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare*[294]

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[292] Robert Redfield, 'Societies and Cultures as Natural Systems', pp. 19-32 passim.
[293] See Donald N. Levine, Ellwood B. Carter, and Eleanor Miller Gorman, 'Simmel's Influence on American Sociology, 1,' *The American Journal of Sociology,* vol. 81, 4, (1976), pp. 813-845.
[294] Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (London: Croom Helm, 1972), p. 14.

In a recent essay, 'Strangers in Their Own Country,' Declan Kiberd brought his considerable erudition to an analysis of racism, multiculturalism and social change in Ireland.[295] The scholarship is impressive: examples ranging from racism in Germany, to identity politics in the United States and English football hooliganism are used to help think about the tension between the national culture of the nation-state and the stranger. There is a simple question here: is a liberal multiculturalism, where both national culture and minority difference is respected, possible? His is a liberal kind of answer: that there is nothing wrong with a national culture that enshrines a set of codes within the nation-state and that this does not necessarily take from the possibility of an inclusive multiculturalism.

The example of the United States is illustrative here. Kiberd quotes the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to support his argument that the alternative to supporting national culture is a fraying of the integrity of the nation-state into pockets of minority politics and 'the cult of ethnicity,' where suddenly everyone is a member of a minority and is demanding respect for their 'culture'.[296] This is indeed Schlesinger's argument for a reinvigorated common national culture. But Schlesinger also asserts that the freedom to practice one's cultural traditions and beliefs—the basis for this entire debate—is a value of western civilisation, and

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[295] Declan Kiberd, 'Strangers in Their Own Country' in *Multiculturalism: A View From the Two Irelands*, a part of the Crosscurrents Series, by Enda Longley and Declan Kiberd (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), pp. 45-75.
[296] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York and London: WW Norton and Company, 1991), p. 20. As an example of multiculturalism gone mad, Schlesinger describes how in 1996 New York's Irish-American lobby pushed a bill through legislature for instruction in human rights 'with particular attention to ... genocide, slavery, the Holocaust, and the mass starvation in Ireland from 1845-1850,' with the latter breech of human rights being the sole responsibility of the British. See *Ibid.*, p. 103

'our' civilisation should not have 'guilt trips laid on it by champions of cultures based on despotism, superstition, tribalism, and fanaticism. ... [*Africans*] who show themselves either incapable of operating democracy or ideologically hostile to the democratic idea.'[297] Kiberd's argument is obviously far more sophisticated.

Kiberd's ultimate inspiration is the work of Julia Kristeva, who traces the ontology of the stranger from antiquity. Like Schlesinger in his more lucid moments, in *Etrangers à nous-mémes* Kristeva saw herself as writing to uncover an optimal national form. But, like Schlesinger in his less lucid moments, she never seems to ask about the conditions that allow people to view others as 'strangers'. Towards the end of her opus she asks: 'how could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself? And to think it has taken such a long time for that small truth.'[298] In this, Kristeva and Kiberd both sing from this same hymn sheet. The liberal hope is that in a world where everyone recognises their essential foreignness there will be no strangers and, like Oscar Wilde, they seem to believe that: 'A map of the world that does not have Utopia on it is not worth even glancing at.'[299] But inner strangeness and the outer stranger is not the same thing, and one cannot put the world in therapy— that is just the conceit of the couch merchants.[300] Liberal hope has a way of

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[297] *Ibid.,* pp. 133-134.

[298] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves,* trans. Leon Roudiez [first published as *Etrangers à nous-mémes*] (New York, London Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 182.

[299] Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' in Sally Ledger and Rodger Luckhurst (eds.), *Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 189.

[300] This point has been made elsewhere. See, for example, Tibor Dessewffy, 'Strangerhood without Boundaries: An Essay in the Sociology of Knowledge,' *Poetics Today,* vol. 17, 4, (1996), pp. 599-615.

turning in on itself. The argument Kristeva makes appears less theoretical in interviews:

> One has never seen such numbers of Arabs and blacks in France. These populations, these new immigrants, are very different from Italian, Spanish, or Polish populations of the thirties or fifties, which wanted to integrate themselves and become French. At that time, there was a very positive image of France, connected with the French revolution, such that one might say, 'Yes, I am Polish, but my children shall become ministers of France.'...
>
> There is a tendency to reject, in the name of cultural pluralism, the good aspects of a tradition. ... If you go about saying, 'Destroy France. Take down the statues of Joan of Arc. No more champagne or *foie gras*,' then you only further the sense of others that their identity is being menaced.[301]

Similarly, in Kiberd's analysis, a nation of strangers, the foundation of a liberal multiculturalism, must not occur by destroying one's origins, 'traditional Irish culture', itself an invention of sorts—and, one might add, something deeply implicated with categories of 'race', particularly in the late 19th century.[302] This is a sophisticated argument that calls for a complex understanding of cultural history, but it is also a political argument that seems, like Kristeva's, to opt for a psychological explanation that, curiously, has no people to disturb its pristine form.[303]

Intimate and detailed accounts of people's lives seem to react corrosively against the smooth surface of pristine theories. Understanding what people do and how they live their lives means paying attention to enshrining and, thus,

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[301] Julia Kristeva, 'Foreign Body, Julia Kristeva interviewed by Scott L. Malcomson,' *Transition*, 59, (1993), pp. 175-176 passim.

[302] Declan Kiberd, 'Strangers in Their Own Country,' p. 65.

[303] Rather than focusing on material, social or historical conditions for the possibility of the stranger, in this line of thinking we move, instead, from the psychic 'I' to the cultural 'we' without ever seeing whom exactly it is that we are talking about and without any sense of what is being described through the use of the word culture.

creativity and repetition, to disjunctures and to differences. The value of this is immeasurable. When one thinks about the resettlement of Hungarian, Chilean and, later, Vietnamese refugees in Ireland one is thinking about examples of how global events can and do have tragic consequences, and one is also thinking about examples of how Ireland is connected up to wider global events and movements of population. To understand such events and the reactions that they inspire is to sooner or later end up questioning how people live their lives and how one might understand creativity and repetition, disjunctures and differences. I have quoted the work of the Ludwig Wittgenstein throughout this work and here it is useful to conjure his spirit once more. The philosopher noted that we are often more comfortable skating on the ice of ideas and theories than walking on the ground of what people actually say and do:

> We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground![304]

To move back to the rough ground is to learn from the study of minorities, and Vietnamese-Irish people have a great deal to impart about issues of concern in Ireland an elsewhere. There is little doubt that racism exists in Ireland but not enough is known about how it impacts upon those that suffer from it and about how this and more subtle stereotypes provide the conditions for identity to be shaped. There is little doubt that minorities are not fully integrated in Irish society, but issues such as civic participation may only be addressed by taking account of the ways in which people often live lives that are connected to other societies and to other parts of a transnational world. When one reflects back on

the stories of Vietnamese-Irish people such as Tan, the young professional, the elderly Mrs Nguyen or Phuong, poised at an unenviable crossroad in her life, one may see that to address issues that range from racism to stereotyping or civic participation one must appreciate fully how these issues impact in actual examples.

Vietnamese-Irish people are not alone in having a great deal to impart. As we understand more about the history of cultural difference in Ireland, and learn more from the lessons of the Irish diaspora, it is likely that off-the-shelf theoretical models will give way as more is learned about life from a minority perspective. I hope that this research finds new feet and takes a step in this direction. I also wish that this preliminary sketch of Vietnamese-Irish life captured something of their struggles, their successes and their hopes. Elizabeth Bowen once asked: how long does it take to belong? 25 years have passed since the first Vietnamese programme refugees arrived in Dublin Airport, and new generations of Vietnamese-Irish people are growing up and getting married, graduating from universities and starting families. The Vietnamese-Irish belong, because belonging is a cultural production that one may term enshrining—it is spatial, but not in the sense of just one place.

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[304] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 107.

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**Illustrative Chronology of Vietnamese History, and Vietnamese-Irish History**

**BC 208:** the Chinese general Trieu Da conquers North of Vietnam and establishes a capital, where he proclaims himself Emperor of 'Nam Viet'.

**BC 1st century:** The Han Dynasty expands and incorporates Nam Viet into the Chinese Empire.

**AD 40:** Trung sisters lead an insurrection against the Chinese and set up an independent state.

**967:** Emperor Dinh Bo Linh ascends throne, calling his state Dai Co Viet. A period of independence follows.

**1428:** The Chinese recognise Vietnam's independence.

**1460-98:** Le Thanh Tong rules Vietnam and introduces legal codes; extends dominion southward.

**1545:** Outbreak of civil strife, which continues for nearly two centuries.

**1627:** Alexander de Rhodes, French missionary, adapts Vietnamese language to Roman alphabet.

**1772:** Ruling Nguyen clan unseated during Tayson rebellion. French missionary activity grows.

**1787:** Pigneau de Béhaine, French missionary, enlists support of Louis XVI to help a pretender to the throne, Nguyen Anh, regain control. France reneges.

**1802:** Gia Long (Nguyen Anh) becomes emperor of Vietnam and unifies the country.

**1843:** Permanent French fleet deployed.

**1847:** Clash between French forces and Vietnamese Mandarins in what is now Danang. Tu Duc ascends throne with plans to eliminate Christianity in Vietnam.

**1852:** Napoleon III takes power in France and launches a series of expeditions to Vietnam to protect missionaries and gain trade concessions.

**1862:** Tu Duc signs a treaty with the French.

**1887:** France creates Indochinese Union composed of Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin and Cambodia.

**1918:** Russian Revolution begins in October. Ho Chi Minh, the Nguyen Ai Quoc, arrives in Paris.

**1919:** At the Versailles Peace Conference, Ho Chi Minh petitions President Woodrow Wilson for self-determination for Vietnam.

**1930:** Ho Chi Minh forms Indochinese Communist Party in Hong Kong.

**1932:** Bao Dai returns to Vietnam from school in France to become Emperor of Vietnam.

**1940:** Japan occupies Indochina but leaves the French administration intact.

**1941:** Ho Chi Minh forms the Viet Minh to fight both Japan and France.

**1945:** Ho Chi Minh proclaims a provisional government in Hanoi on August 29. British forces under General Douglas Gracey land in Saigon in September and return authority to the French.

**1946:** China agrees to withdraw forces from Vietnam, and France concedes its extraterritorial rights in China. In March France recognises Vietnam within the French Union, but within a few months the war begins.

**1947:** Britain grants independence to India and Pakistan in August. Bao Dai initials understandings with French High Commissioner Emile Bollaert in December, recognising Vietnamese independence within limits.

**1949:** Establishment of the People's Republic of China.

**1954:** French defeated at *Điên Biên Phủ*. Ngo Dinh Diem becomes Prime Minister. Provisional demarcation line at $17^{th}$ parallel divided Vietnam pending political settlement to be achieved through nationwide elections. General J. Lawton Collins arrives in Saigon to affirm American support for Diem. Hundreds of thousands of refugees flee from the north to the south with the help of the US Navy.

**1955:** The United States begins direct aid to the Saigon Government and agrees to train the South Vietnamese Army. Diem rejects Geneva accords and refuses to participate in nationwide elections.

**1957:** Communist insurgent activity begins in the South.

**1963:** Battle of Ap Bac. South Vietnamese troops and police shoot at Buddhist demonstrators in Hue. Buddhist monks begin to commit self-immolation. November 2, Diem and his brother Nhu are murdered.

**1964:** General Nguyen Khanh seizes power in Saigon, January 30. US Congress passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August.

**1965:** In February, Operation Rolling Thunder begins—the sustained bombing of North Vietnam. In March, two marine battalions land to defend Danang Airfield. Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky takes over as Prime Minister in June.

**1966:** Buddhist demonstrations against the government in Hué and Danang.

**1967:** American troop strength approaches 500,000 by the year's end.

**1968:** The *Têt* offensive begins. Richard Nixon elected President, and Henry Kissinger becomes the National Security Adviser.

**1969:** Nixon begins secret bombing of Cambodia, March 18. Kissinger meets covertly in Paris with North Vietnamese.

**1972:** North Vietnam launches offensive across the Demilitarised Zone.

**1973:** Ceasefire agreements signed in Paris. Last American combat troops leave Vietnam.

**1974:** Civil War.

**1975:** South Vietnamese Government abandons its northern provinces of South Vietnam abandoned. In Cambodia the capital falls to the Khmer Rouge. Evacuation of last Americans from Saigon. Fall of Saigon.

**1976**: In July UNHCR asks the Irish Government to participate in resettling Indo-Chinese refugees. Government refuses.

**1978:** 'Boat People' crisis received international media attention. In December 1978 UNHCR convenes the Geneva Conference to discuss the Southeast Asian Crisis.

**1979:** Ireland holds EEC Presidency. In February the Government convenes an *ad hoc* committee, including a number of NGOs, to examine resettling 'Boat People'. 22 May 1979 the Irish Government offers 100 resettlement places. 21 July 1979 the number to be resettled was raised to over 200 persons at the Geneva Conference.
9/10 August 1979 58 refugees arrive in Dublin. On 20 September 51 more refugees arrive.

**1980:** Dispersal of refugees to a variety of locations around Ireland begins.

**1982:** Secondary migration to Dublin begins.

**1983:** Growth in Vietnamese involvement in Chinese food mobile takeaways begins.

**1986:** Irish Government facilitates the naturalisation of Vietnamese refugees under the *Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1986*.