

# **Sentiments Across the Pacific: The Relationship Between Vietnamese Catholics in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Homeland**

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Submitted: 22 February 2024. Accepted: 8 July 2024. Published: 7 August 2024

Volume 33, 2025. pp. 279–300. <http://doi.org/10.25133/JPSSv332025.015>

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## **Abstract**

The end of the Vietnam War engendered a new relationship between Vietnamese refugees and their homeland. Based on fieldwork in Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, Phan Thiết, and New Orleans, Louisiana, this article shows how transnational relationships have benefitted overseas Vietnamese, their Catholic home parish, families, and themselves. By analyzing deterritorialization and diaspora perspectives, this article further argues that since its 'Renovation' of 1986, the Vietnamese government has encountered challenges in its attempt to embrace a large population in the diaspora. Ultimately, the policy has led to side effects that have enlarged the gap between overseas Vietnamese and the government of Vietnam. However, Catholic sentiment and familial responsibilities became more significant than anti-communism for the Catholic Vietnamese in New Orleans in explaining their transnational and trans-Pacific relationships.

## **Keywords**

Catholic Vietnamese; diaspora; transnational; Vietnamese Americans

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## Introduction

Transnationalism among Southeast Asians living in developed countries has received considerable attention from social science scholars. Nevertheless, the literature on these populations often pays attention to either the return migrants or the migrants in settlement society. While Ninh (2023) focused on the role of U.S. refugee descendants in recentralize their fragmented communities through the adaptation of holy mother worship, Truitt (2021) paid attention to the Buddhist practice in New Orleans and showed how such a small Buddhist population dealt with multiple issues in the community to establish the system of Buddhist temples in the Gulf Coast. In the meantime, Hoang (2019) explored how the exilic experience shaped the transnational identity among Vietnamese American Catholics. Less known, however, are the perspectives, experiences, and behaviors regarding the homeland [*quê hương*] among Vietnamese Catholics living in the United States. This article examines the transnational relationships between Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans and their Catholic parishes back home in Vietnam. It further illustrates the ongoing relationship between Catholics in New Orleans and their relatives and friends in the homeland. By reviewing transnational flows of money, people, and ideas, the article demonstrates that homeland sentiments have never ceased. Moreover, recent decades have witnessed the growing exchange of news with the homeland, strengthening the consciousness of the diasporic Catholic community. Consequently, homeland and diasporic populations could mutually influence each other.

Below, the article begins with an overview of scholarship on the Vietnamese diaspora, especially on deterritorialization and transnationalism. Next, it analyzes interviews and other materials to show the complex relationship between Catholic Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans vis-à-vis their families, friends, and home parishes in Phú Quốc and Phan Thiết that developed since the end of the Vietnam War. Against the postwar difficulties that led to their departure from Vietnam, their experience of sending remittances to support their families and home parishes nonetheless demonstrates the limits of anti-communism in the diaspora. Without dismissing the place of anti-communist ideology in the construction of diasporic communities that are commonly associated with memories of South Vietnam, the article argues that familial responsibilities and religious commitment to the people of the homeland have most crucially shaped the behavior of Vietnamese American Catholics in New Orleans. Lastly, while most diaspora studies have been conducted by non-Vietnamese-citizen researchers, this article will add an insider's perspective to the literature.

## Scholarship on the Vietnamese diaspora

Prompted by the dispersal and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and refugees' problems ensuing from living in host countries, initial scholarship about the diaspora mostly insisted on the adaptation process. It forced identity change in the United States (Freeman, 1995). Refugee populations in French-influenced areas such as Quebec (Canada) and Paris (France) were well documented by Dorais et al. (1987) and Bousquet (1991). Dorais et al. pointed out that while some managed to integrate economically into the Canadian job market, many tried to re-establish traditional culture within the host country. Bousquet (1991) found something similar in that the Vietnamese in Paris confined themselves to homeland politics rather than participating in the local politics of the adopted country, even if many were economically successful. As these works involved studies at the early stage of

the settlement of refugees in host countries, they seemingly explained how a Vietnamese diaspora was initially formed.

The concept of diaspora was initially used in theology or the study of religion to refer to either the Bible or non-biblical cases of a dispersed people or group linked together by their religion (Dufoix, 2008). Until the mid-1980s, scholars used the word 'diaspora' when referring to four groups of people: Jews, people of African origin, Palestinians, and Chinese. Sheffer (1986) provided a new definition of modern diasporas as "ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homeland" (p. 3). Safran (1991) then proposed that diaspora referred to communities who had several of the six following characteristics: their or their ancestors' dispersion from a 'center' to at least two peripheral foreign regions; persistence of a collective memory concerning the homeland; conviction that their acceptance by the host society is impossible; maintenance of an often idealized homeland as a place of return; belief in a collective duty to engage in the perpetuation, restoration, or security of the country of origin; and maintenance of individual or collective relations with the country of origin. However, recent studies have argued for the necessity of reconsidering diasporic stability. Dorais (2001) indicated that as time passed, incipient and largely unorganized Vietnamese refugee communities transformed into ethnic collectivities, which tried to become an integral but unassimilated part of mainstream Canadian, American, Australian, or European society.

This last assertion applies Clifford's (1994) and Tölölyan's (1996) ideas to studying Vietnamese in Canada and the United States. By arguing that there is no ideal model regarding how a diaspora should exist, Clifford (1994) paid attention to historical moments and social/cultural dimensions in the experiences of migrant groups. Clifford wrote, "[a] shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin." Following this approach by not defining all Vietnamese overseas communities as belonging to a diaspora, Dorais (2001) investigated the constant changes of diasporic moments in the Vietnamese community in Quebec relative to Vietnamese Americans in California. Documenting the greater integration of Vietnamese immigrants into mainstream Canadian society, Dorais pointed out the community's loss of diasporic moments and dimensions. They also showed that the Vietnamese population in California had maintained diasporic moments and dimensions because a significant number of their people used to be linked to the American involvement in Vietnam and because the United States had to sustain its self-assigned role as the champion of liberty.

These historical circumstances helped Vietnamese Americans sustain the anti-communist sentiment. Therefore, although the overseas Vietnamese may not necessarily form a 'diaspora,' the collective memories of uprooting and dispossession have ensued through diasporic moments. Nguyen (2017) also described the activities of refugee nationalism among Vietnamese Americans in Southern California and pointed out the relationship with the construction of identity within this distinct group of refugee Americans. The anti-communist activities of Little Saigon residents can, thus, also be seen as diasporic moments and dimensions from a diasporic perspective.

Drawing on this primarily ethnographic scholarship, this article finds it productive to scrutinize the diasporic dimensions in the experiences of Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans instead of looking for a predefined Vietnamese diaspora. Diasporic moments/dimensions refer to activities and practices of Vietnamese Americans that remind them of the displacement from their homeland. By observing daily life activities and those in

the Catholic Church, my fieldwork materials examined the role diasporic dimensions play in establishing a transnational relationship with the home country and the extent to which these dimensions contributed to the sustainability of the community.

## **Scholarship on deterritorialization and transnationalism**

In the 1990s, ethnic and immigration studies adopted a more global perspective (Appadurai, 1996; Basch et al., 1994; Vertovec & Cohen, 1999). Although different in emphasis, they shared a commonality that an ethnic group should no longer be studied within the bounded nation-state. This scholarship also called for analyzing phenomena through the lenses of globalization, deterritorialization, and transnationalism. Owing to massive emigration and immigration worldwide, citizens of a nation-state can live in another country but still be within the nation-state (Kearney, 1995). This issue has influenced scholarly studies, requiring social scientists to formulate novel perspectives on newly created transnational ties. Accordingly, although people, cultures, places, and nation-states remain the main subjects of recent studies, they are analyzed from a transnational viewpoint.

From such a global perspective, Schiller et al. (1992) not only highlighted the diversity of migrants' involvement in the home and settlement society but also questioned the bounded conceptualizations of race, class, ethnicity, and nationalism that have existed in social science and popular thinking. Moreover, Basch et al. (1994) defined transnationalism as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link their societies of origin and settlement. Unlike a diasporic group, transnational immigrants voluntarily leave their home countries and are unrestrained by the myth of return. Their relationships with their home countries are non-antagonistic. Various national leaders actively engage in nation-building projects, extending national hegemony beyond national boundaries.

Since the 1990s, when global perspectives began to influence the social sciences, studies of overseas Vietnamese have incorporated the transnational standpoint. These include studies of Australian Vietnamese exiles and their notions of return by Thomas (1997) and Carruthers (2001, 2008), and more recently, studies by Koh (2015) and Koh (2011) and Nguyen-Akbar (2016) on return migration and by Small (2012a, 2012b) on remittance-gift economies. Studies of overseas Vietnamese have not been confined to the post-Vietnam War legacy. Represented by works of scholars including Angie (2003), Schwenkel (2015), and Thai (2008), they have extended to other themes such as labor and transnational capital, policing, transnational marriages, and 'sojourn-immigrants' for educational and professional purposes.

Another approach offered by Basch et al. (1994) has been useful in theorizing how the nation-state has adjusted to transnational processes. They pointed out the deterritorialization processes of the Philippines, Grenada, and Haiti, in which these governments and the national leaders articulated national discourses that claimed their overseas people as inseparable parts of the nation-states. Calling this process 'deterritorialization,' Basch et al. further argued for the nation-building projects that extend national hegemony beyond national boundaries. However, applying this approach to studying overseas Vietnamese is challenged by a hiatus between Vietnam's communist government and post-refugee Vietnamese New Orleanians. As Carruthers (2001) reported regarding Vietnamese Australians, deterritorialized nation-states are particularly inappropriate in the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, where the legitimacy of the contemporary nation-state is so contested. I also observed the difficulties experienced by the Vietnamese government in its attempt to implement this policy regarding Vietnamese in the United States. Not limiting my data to the population in New Orleans, I

proceeded to study the policy implementation at local levels in Vietnam. Drawing on my three-month fieldwork in the hometowns of most Vietnamese in New Orleans and ten months in New Orleans, this article analyzes the impact of the Vietnamese deterritorialization policy in Vietnam and the United States.

Return migration issues are explored by Koh (2015), Koh (2011), and Nguyen-Akbar (2016), who focused merely on the return of the second generation of overseas Vietnamese in Ho Chi Minh City and pointed out the ambiguity of returnees to the identity of being rather Vietnamese or overseas Vietnamese. Considering the 1.5 and 2nd generations of the *Việt Kiều*, Nguyen-Akbar (2016) described their enthusiasm before coming to Vietnam and frustration after working there. Moreover, Nguyen-Akbar submitted that the transnational movements of their key informants between Vietnam and the United States affirmed what it meant to be American and provided a window of opportunity to realize the American dream. Although their arguments are rational to the case in big cities, research populations like those studied by the above authors were unavailable in Phuốc Tỉnh and Thanh Hải. Local policies toward these returnees seemingly lack significant effects on such small towns. The reasons for this and how it has affected the implementation of the government's policy are comprehensively discussed toward the end of this article.

## **Deterritorialization and the Catholic diasporic community in New Orleans**

This research focuses on the Vietnamese American population in New Orleans who left Vietnam because of the communist victory over South Vietnam. Inspired by the literature above on postwar phenomena, ethnographic materials have driven me to highlight the transnational connections between overseas Vietnamese and their relatives in Vietnam and the constant anti-communist agenda among Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans. However, I do not restrict my analysis to the antagonism between the current Vietnamese government and overseas Vietnamese. Instead, this article employs the global perspective to analyze the Vietnamese government's deterritorialization policy toward overseas Vietnamese, particularly Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans.

Moreover, I find it useful to investigate the interactions between diasporic activists in New Orleans and the Vietnamese government on this issue. Unlike Vietnamese in Southeast Asia or Eastern Europe, Vietnamese Americans, particularly Vietnamese New Orleanians, regard the deterritorialization policy as a threat to the stability of the diasporic community. This article will show several contesting arguments on homeland issues among Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans.

By locating my research in two countries, I can examine the ongoing debate in the diaspora regarding remittance practice. While this practice began a long time ago, right after Vietnamese refugees resettled, it has been challenged by the exile mass media that argues that sending money home would help prolong the communist regime. Accordingly, drawing together ethnographic materials from Vietnam and the United States, this article highlights several contradictions among the Vietnamese in the diaspora. Noteworthy is the distinction between the homeland and the current regime. While some respondents argue for their responsibility to help poor relatives at home, others suggest that strategies against the Vietnamese communist regime should not be confused with assisting home Catholic parishes and people of the homeland.

## Methodology

The findings in this article result from 10 months of fieldwork in New Orleans, Louisiana, United States, and three months in Vietnam. The literature review shows that all of the studies were conducted by non-Vietnamese scholars. Even though their ancestral homeland was in Vietnam, they studied from a non-Vietnamese perspective. My position as a Vietnamese-based personality with an understanding of the socio-political situation in Vietnam helps interpret the multi-sited ethnographic materials more nuanced. This will be presented through the analysis of Vietnamese policy from the Communist Party Central Committee to the Government of Vietnam and the communal authority.

My multi-sited fieldwork consisted of two phases in New Orleans and two towns in Vietnam, Phuoc Tinh and Phan Thiet. Since entering a community to research was difficult, I volunteered for a community development corporation of Vietnamese people in New Orleans in July 2010. The daily contact with local fishermen and older persons helped me to understand the situation of the Vietnamese poor in New Orleans East. By the time of my dissertation fieldwork in July 2011, a new priest had been assigned to pastor the Mary Queen of Viet Nam church (MQVN). In order to conduct fieldwork in this Vietnamese American Catholic parish, I thought that I must seek support from the pastoral priest. Being a Vietnamese from Vietnam, I was aware of my outsider position in New Orleans. If I had conducted some interviews in the parish and a rumor had come to the pastor that a Vietcong (Vietnamese communist) was here, my research would have been in trouble; nobody would have dared to talk to me. Therefore, I decided to come and speak to the priest about myself and my research. He seemed very open to me, and I had an opportunity to present my research and plan for New Orleans. Toward the end of the meeting, the priest expressed his appreciation for my work. He recognized the need for someone to write about the community and suggested that I be careful when discussing Vietnamese politics here in New Orleans. The meeting with the priest helped me to relocate my research settings to the members of the Catholic parish. I was lucky to join a church choir and present at every Sunday mass. Since then, I have met and built rapport with local people.

Studying the relationship between Vietnamese Americans and their homeland, I wanted to explore whether this relationship had been transnationally maintained through time. At first, I tried to focus on one area and decided to conduct a two-month fieldwork in Phuoc Tinh commune. However, through the ethnographic materials from Phuoc Tinh, I found that it would be more interesting to see the patterns of transnational connections in both Phuoc Tinh and Thanh Hai communes. Therefore, I decided to stay one more month in Vietnam to conduct fieldwork in Thanh Hai.

I knew the introductory documents from the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology could only get me past the initial barrier of local administrative offices. In order to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, I also had to have access to the people and the people's confidence. The rapport built with people in New Orleans was beneficial for me to enter both fieldwork settings in Vietnam. In both areas, I stayed in the houses of the close relatives of my key informants in New Orleans, who all provided helpful support for my research. While the son of the house owner in Phuoc Tinh was my local key informant, the house owner in Phan Thiet was eager to introduce me to her acquaintances. Although I could not and did not aim to conduct thorough/extensive fieldwork in these two areas in Vietnam, the ethnographic materials in these two areas were rich and informative for my research.

## Thanh Hải, Phước Tỉnh, and New Orleans

### The dispersion of people and the national unification

Phan Thiết was 'liberated' on April 19, 1975 (Thu Ha, 2023). According to my local respondents, people in Thanh Hải Catholic parish had left the village on fishing boats to the South since March 1975 and evacuated to Vũng Tàu. The fight was hard, and people wanted to avoid trouble. Mr. Phu recalled that

*"We were not fleeing the country; it was just evacuating from the fighting zones. We evacuated to Vũng Tàu with the idea that we would return after the fight. Nobody had the idea of fleeing to the United States. However, after we evacuated to Vũng Tàu, the war expanded to that region. I remember I arrived in Vũng Tàu on Easter Saturday."*

People in Phước Tỉnh (Phước Tuy province, Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu province today) also told me that they experienced the same situation. The center of Phước Tuy province was liberated on April 27, 1975. Then, the Liberation Army spread to other districts, including Long Dat district and Phuoc Tinh commune, the next day. Threatened by the sound of guns and canons since April 28, 1975, members of the Phước Tỉnh and Tân Phước parishes began going out to sea on their boats with family members. People evacuating from other areas also left for the sea, away from the fighting zone. Lucky people were picked up by American naval ships; others drifted on boats until they reached an island, died of hunger at sea, or were even robbed and murdered by pirates. After a few months, some of the first refugees from Phước Tỉnh and Phan Thiết were sponsored to New Orleans by the Archdiocese of New Orleans and settled down in Versailles Arms, New Orleans East. So, what happened to the parishioners of the two Catholic parishes who stayed behind after the Northern Army took over the South? This section provides a background for the later discussion of the distant relationship between overseas Vietnamese and their homeland.

### The Vietnamese command economy, 1975–1986

After taking over southern Vietnam, the National Liberation Front planned to retain its separate administration for a period before peaceful reunification. By keeping the administration intact, the economy of the South would not change drastically. However, at the 24<sup>th</sup> plenary session of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, whose name later changed to the Vietnamese Communist Party, held in Đà Lạt in July and August of 1975, the Party decided to bypass a period of separate administration and move rapidly toward socialism and unification with the North (Duiker, 1990). Later, the unified Assembly convened in June 1976 and approved the formation of the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

From 1976, the command economy was applied to the entire country. Following the success of the first five-year plan implemented from 1961 to 1965, the new government carried out the second (1976–1980) and third (1981–1985) five-year plans. To implement the second five-year plan, Hanoi invested 30 billion piasters, equivalent to US\$10–12 billion. However, the fact that China withheld financial aid and the United States did not provide money per Section 21 of the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement turned the second five-year plan into a financial disaster (Nguyen, 1983). Meanwhile, Lê Duẩn, secretary-general of the party, and Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng insisted on expanding the scale of the cooperatives in the North and doing

away with the farming contracts between the peasants and the state that had been tacitly approved of during the war (Kimura, 1989).

The command economy and collectivization process worsened the economy of the South. Nguyen (1983) reported that by 1981, strict food rationing had been implemented. Ordinary citizens living in Ho Chi Minh City were allowed a quota of only 2 kg of rice and 5 kg of subsidiary crops per month; more was available but only on the black market. Rice is the staple diet of all Vietnamese. Since 1979, however, they have also been eating sorghum, a grain previously raised only as feed for livestock. During the same period, the monthly meat ration was as low as 500 g per household of six persons or fewer (700 g for larger families). Such a diet resulted in severe malnutrition.

However, Khanh (1989) compared that if the country produced 350 kg of rice per capita in 1975, its food production reduced to 304 kg per capita in 1985, and in 1987, this figure was 280 kg. Meanwhile, food assistance from China and Russia was no longer available (Beresford & Phong, 2000; Fforde & de Vylder, 1996; Khanh, 1989; Luong, 2003). Only after the 6th Party Congress in 1986, under the open-door policy of Renovation [Đổi mới], did economic life improve.

The open-door policy was deployed in several fields, including the country's economic system, economic sectors, and foreign affairs. One purpose of this policy was to replace the command economy that had degraded the country's economy. Under this new policy, the economic system changed from the centrally planned economic system to the 'socialism-oriented market economic system' [*nền kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*]. This system has been used in documents of the Vietnamese Communist Party since 1986. However, scholars have criticized it for being vague, if not undefinable. State- and collective-owned enterprises remained the major sectors. However, the economic system recognized other sectors, including private companies, households, and individual enterprises. With changes in the economic system, Vietnam's government sought to establish diplomatic relations with other Western countries, including the United States. This overall economic situation served as the background of the local economy in Phan Thiết and PhuỚc Tỉnh.

### **Thanh Hải parish of Phan Thiết**

After the chaos of April 1975, Thanh Hải parishioners, who had not been picked up by American naval ships, returned to the village and continued their everyday lives. Nevertheless, after its consolidation, the new regime applied rigid policies to the economic and spiritual lives of the locals. The collectivization model of the North was then applied to the South's economy. Under this model, means of production, including fishing boats, tractors, and buffaloes, were collectivized, and the workforce had to work in cooperatives.

When the collectivization model was implemented in Phan Thiết, Thanh Hải fishermen had to work for the local fishing cooperative; boat owners had no choice other than handing in their boats to the cooperative. However, the cooperative did not possess the fishing boats. Instead, the cooperative priced the boats, and each boat became shared property among 8 to 10 fishermen. A fisherman who did not have money could still be a shareholder of a boat, with the condition that his fishing product for each trip would be deducted from the owed amount. Boat owners who wanted to continue fishing also had to be shareholders of the boat. This part would be subtracted from the price of his boat. The catch for each trip was sold to the

cooperative to buy rice and oil. During the collectivization period, the cooperative was the only agency where fishermen could legally sell their fishing products for rice and oil.

During this time, rumors about people who left the country circulated throughout the community. Some people left the country for their boats as they could not live under such conditions. Mr. Phu recalled,

*"There were families separated because some members fled the country, very sad. Gradually, they had to overcome their losses and move on to life. After some time, there was information about people who had left the country and humanitarian programs for refugees. This led to a wave of leaving the country."*

The official history of the Thanh Hải parish notes that in early 1975, the parish's population was 6,300 people. From 1975 to 1979, the number of people who fled the country by boat was high enough to attract the attention of local authorities. The church of Thanh Hai parish was ordered to be closed in 1980 by a decision of the People's Committee of Phan Thiết (Bàng, 2016). According to a memoir of Mr. Kham, a former president of the parish, "On February 12, 1980, Father Vu Ngoc Dang, the pastor of the parish, was arrested as a suspect for helping people to leave the country, Thanh Hải church was then closed." From 1980 to 7 February 1988, parishioners had to attend church in a nearby parish, Vinh Thuy. After eight years, the local governments saw no threats from the parish and allowed parishioners to reopen the church. In 1988, Thanh Hải parish resumed its function, and its population reached 6,600 people in 2005.

### **The Phước Tỉnh commune**

The communists advanced to the Phước Tuy province (currently in the Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu province) and Phước Tỉnh commune during the last three days of the war. It created a flow of people illegally leaving the country. Not only did people leave around April 30, 1975, but numerous people secretly fled the country in the following months and years. In Phước Tỉnh and Thanh Hải, the Catholic population was predominant in number before 1975, as they were Northern migrants resettled after the Geneva Accords in 1954. The reason why the Catholic population left Vietnam could be dated back to the war against the French from 1946 to 1954 in the North of Vietnam. The relationship between the Catholic population in the North of Vietnam and Ho Chí Minh-led Việt Minh was often mutually antagonistic during the war against the French. Notably, the two dioceses of Phát Diệm and Bùi Chu maintained a self-defense militia against Viet Minh forces. The historian Peter Hansen (2009) noted that many northern Catholics had fought not only for the Catholic militia but also under French command. In 1975, the threat of being persecuted by communist forces was one of the reasons northern Catholics initially tried to leave the country. They were also afraid of massacres like those that occurred in Huế during the 1968 Tet Offensive. This led to a chaotic situation in South Vietnam.

Some recollections among the former refugees vividly illustrate the chaos. Mr. Phuc, a parishioner of the Phước Tỉnh parish, recalled that

*"At that time, I was a helper for mass. Every day, people went to church at 4 a.m., discussing who had left the night before. Nobody knew what the future would be like for these people. The entire parish was sad. Attending*

*the mass, we could see who had left. I was moved. I think about 70% of the parishioners left. In my family, six people left."*

Drawing up a longer period, Mr. Tuc said,

*"People began to leave in 1975, and also from 1977–1978 when people felt that they could not continue living like that. At that time, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees had a program to rescue boat people from 1977–1978 until 1983–1984. Between 1978 and 1985, people often left at night. In the morning, when we heard that some boats had left, we felt sad. It [the departure of numerous parishioners] motivated more people to leave, and the whole parish wavered between going and staying."*

Post-reunification developments, especially the cooperative economic model that was applied to Phước Tỉnh and other communes, prompted the departure of many parishioners. In the mid-1980s, people in Phước Tỉnh resumed work as before. Father Liem, who had been a pastor of Phước Tỉnh parish, mentioned two reasons: everyone had to work and earn a livelihood, and refugee programs stopped receiving people. However, he added that

*"the people in Phước Tỉnh now do not really have the desire to do business [không tha thiết làm ăn]. People from abroad send money to their family members here. I think a more precise word is lazy [lười biếng] because they have relied on financial aid from abroad. In fact, some people still work, but they receive support from overseas relatives. They run the business but don't care about whether it is successful because they are still backed by overseas resources."*

Their observation led me to explore the long-distance relationship between Phan Thiết and Phước Tỉnh people and their overseas relatives.

## Keeping long-distance connections

### Family relationships across the Pacific

Thanh Hải and Phước Tỉnh are Catholic home parishes of several people in New Orleans. This section explores the transnational relationships between people of the diaspora and their home parishes in Vietnam. After the unification in 1975, many people from these Catholic parishes left the country until the early 1980s because of the economic hardships experienced by the cooperative model and the command economy. During that period, only some families received letters from abroad. Only after the open-door policy in 1986 did people who had left Vietnam since 1975 begin to send home more goods and make some return visits to their home villages.

Compared to the pre-1975 image of 'the commune of millionaires' [xã tỉ phú], Phước Tỉnh commune became quiet and empty under the command economy. Mr. Tuc recalled, "After 1975, the fishing industry in Phước Tỉnh was degraded. This was because the gas supply was limited, and the authorities applied strict policies." From 1975 to 1978, people in Phước Tỉnh had little to no information about the parishioners who had left. It was only in 1978 that people from abroad began contacting relatives at home.

People in Phước Tỉnh admitted that the gifts sent from abroad during the command economy period significantly helped their financial situation. Mr. Phuc stated,

*“People in Phước Tỉnh received goods like medicine, clothes, and electronics from their relatives abroad. People then had some money to buy food [by selling the gifts]. I also needed help from my children living abroad when my fishing business failed a few times.”*

Thanh Hải parishioners also experienced the same kind of financial aid. Mr. Phu recalled,

*“When Vietnam and the United States began to have a diplomatic relationship, people who had left after the war also began to send home goods, clothes, and textiles. People at home sold these goods for money to live. With foreign goods, the livelihood of some people in Thanh Hải improved. Otherwise, economic life was difficult. You would have been arrested if you ran a business. There was no free trade at that time.”*

A former president of Thanh Hải parish said,

*“Around 1980, people began to receive goods from abroad, goods only, not money. I think overseas people simply wanted to establish whether it was possible for relatives at home to receive goods. The goods were extremely useful because people could sell them to pay for living expenses, for children to go to school, and to repair houses.”*

Evidently, goods from abroad contributed to the quality of life of people staying behind. In both parishes, among the 1954 *Bắc di cư* families, it is impossible to find a household without relatives living abroad. However, the flow of goods seemed to be one-way, from overseas people to their relatives in the homeland. What overseas people faced during that time remained unknown to their relatives in Vietnam. Relying on gifts and remittances from relatives abroad, people in Vietnam conceptualized an American dream that they believed their overseas relatives had achieved. This miscomprehension opened a large gap between the people of the two countries.

### **Relationship with Thanh Hải parish in Phan Thiết**

Besides maintaining family relationships, overseas people connect spiritually with their home parishes. Both case studies of the Tân Phước and Thanh Hải parishes show a strong sentiment of overseas parishioners toward their home parishes. As mentioned above, the church at Thanh Hải was closed from 1980 to 1988 because the pastor priest was arrested for being suspected of helping parishioners leave the country (Bàng, 2016). However, after eight years without maintenance, the church required reconstruction. The parish council met and planned to rebuild the church in the subsequent years. Knowing that the parishioners could not afford to build a new church, the council composed a ‘heart-appealing letter’ [*tâm thư*] to overseas people. Mr. Phu shared,

*“About the contribution to the reconstruction of the church, I must say that about 70 to 80% [of the cost] belongs to overseas Vietnamese. For example, we spent hundreds of thousands of U.S. dollars to build this church. I was the general secretary of the parish, so I knew the details.*

*While the money was from overseas parishioners, local parishioners contributed labor to build the church.*

A detail that not everybody knew was that Thanh Hải parish's leaders did not send the heart-appealing letter from Phan Thiết. Mr. Hanh told me, "We asked for contact information from local parishioners. However, we did not send the letters from Phan Thiết. From 1992 to 1993, we had to go far [to Ho Chi Minh City] to send letters." He explained that they had to do it to keep it secret and avoid trouble with the authorities because this activity involved people from abroad. The communication demonstrates that after 20 years of living abroad, former Thanh Hai parishioners maintained a spiritual sentiment toward the home parish.

### **Relationship with the Tân Phước parish in the Phước Tỉnh commune**

A storm destroyed the church on December 5, 2006. Subsequently, the parish council convinced the pastor to build a new church instead of repairing it. This was because the collapsed church was built long ago, in 1964 (Bishop's Office of Bà Rịa, 2012). Because everything was outdated, the storm was the final hit for the collapse. Father Huy, the vice-pastor of Tân Phước parish, recalled, "The roof on the center altar was blown away. The walls had been cracked for a long time. That's why we had to rebuild the church." The problem of the parish was obtaining sufficient money for the construction. Everyone knew that they could not merely rely on local parishioners. Mr. Thang, a former parish council president, recalled, "The parish asked each family to contribute two million piasters for the construction project. However, it was not worth much for the needed amount of money, and some families did not contribute anything." At that time, two million piasters were equal to US\$125 in January 2007. Father Huy explained, "When we decided to rebuild the church, we knew that we could not rely on local parishioners because they themselves were also affected by the storm. Therefore, we considered overseas parishioners."

The year 2006 was the 31st year after the first Phước Tỉnh commune parishioners had left their hometown to become refugees. At this time, the relationship between former parishioners and their homeland relatives emerged as the leading resource for the parishes in this chaotic situation. Leaving Vietnam on boats, after settling down in other countries, such as the United States or Australia, they contacted home and maintained a relationship through gifts and remittances. As everyone knew that overseas people had better financial resources than those in Vietnam, the priests and council of the parish requested that parishioners try to contact their relatives living abroad to help the parish obtain the money to rebuild the church. The progress was relatively fast in that while the church collapsed in December 2006, Father Huy could make a fundraising trip to Australia in June 2007.

In November 2007, Father Huy visited Santa Ana, California, Houston, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana, for fundraising. In New Orleans, he stayed in Village de l'Est in the house of a person initially from Tân Phước parish. That person organized meetings with several Tân Phước natives for Father Huy to talk about the church-rebuilding progress. He recalled, "In the United States, they did not organize fundraising parties. I was taken to previous Tân Phước parishioners and met some people whom I had known."

**Author:** Did you ask about their sentiment toward the homeland?

**Father Huy:** Yes, they maintained love for the homeland and home parish. One problem was that life at home was still difficult; therefore, they had to live far away

from their homeland. They said that although their economic conditions were better, they felt a lack of homeland sentiment. Therefore, they loved meeting people from their homeland. Their sentiment always leaned toward the homeland.

**Author:** Did you meet people who had returned to Tân Phước?

**Father Huy:** Yes, I met a lot. Some people already knew about the church's collapse. They told me that they knew because they had visited the homeland and seen the collapsed church.

**Author:** Could you let me know about the results of the trips?

**Father Huy:** It was good (smile). In general, we gained enough money to build the church speedily.

The new church in Tân Phước was completed in 2009. Father Huy told me, "Although the estimated amount to build the church was four billion Vietnam piasters, the final expense was a bit higher." In 2006, four billion Vietnamese piasters were approximately equal to US\$260,000. This case shows that people living abroad maintain relationships with relatives in the homeland. Their relationship with the parish is spiritual, and it turned out to be a responsibility, as they are former parishioners and people of God.

## Remittances and transnationalism

### Transnational relations

Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans have maintained long-distance relationships with their families and home parishes in Vietnam. The transnational goods they sent helped their relatives who remained in Vietnam overcome the economic hardships of the command economy from 1976–1986. These findings support Dorais' (2001) argument that 'transnational or not, family relations play a crucial part in defining Viet Kieu culture and social life.' They also correlate with the finding that immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relationships that link their societies of origin and settlement (Basch et al., 1994).

Besides their relatives living in Vietnam, home parishes are places where diaspora people share collective memories. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) pointed out that remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. Despite being away for over 30 years and not even knowing the current pastors of the parish, their strong sentiment toward the home parish is evident in the cases of the Thanh Hải and Tân Phước parishes. By contributing the largest part of the budget for reconstructing churches, overseas Vietnamese have maintained a spiritual connection with their home parishes. A specific factor that might have played in their case was that they were Catholics. For Catholics, the church building as 'God's house' is the most sacral place. Therefore, once aware that the church at home needed reconstruction, overseas Vietnamese immediately organized fundraising campaigns for the home parish. Notably, overseas Vietnamese Catholic churches have always regarded themselves as a part of the Vietnamese Catholic garden [*Mảnh vườn của Giáo hội Việt Nam*] that had been expelled from the homeland.

This notion was repeated during masses at the Mary Queen of Vietnam parish in New Orleans. The priests kept asking parishioners to pray for the peace of the Vietnamese Catholic

Church [*Giáo hội Công giáo Việt Nam*]. Dufoix's (2008) argument that the placement of religion in the spiritual world tends to keep it separate from the division of territory into political units, namely, states, seems applicable in both cases. Dufoix noted that religion can help mesh the referent origin and the creation of a nonterritorial existence. Nevertheless, although the spiritual sentiment of overseas Vietnamese has been enduring, both cases of the Thanh Hải and Tân Phuoc church reconstruction might not have been that successful if the long-distance relationship had not involved family members rather than unrelated fellow Catholics.

### **Remittances over anti-communism; sentimental relationship above ideology**

Remittances [*kiều hối*] refer to the money sent to someone in a country by people living abroad. Although overseas Vietnamese have maintained relationships with their relatives and home parishes, the practice of sending money to Vietnam is an ongoing debate in the diaspora. Since the 1990s, remittances have gone to Vietnam through formal channels, including bank wires and international remittance services. It had become a major indicator of Vietnam's fiscal years. News agencies in Vietnam reported that if the total remittances were US\$1.2 billion in 1999, it was US\$8 billion in 2010 and US\$16 billion in 2023 (Linh, 2012; Tâm, 2012). Analyzing the significance of remittances, Carruthers (2001) pointed out that "an approximate \$1–1.2 billion USD is remitted to Vietnam annually through official channels, forming 5% of the country's GDP or 11% of export earnings, and bringing more foreign exchange than any other source bar oil exports" (p. 207). According to the World Bank Group (2023), the total amount of remittances to Vietnam was US\$17.2 billion in 2020, equivalent to 6.3% of the country's GDP in the same year. The GDP of Vietnam in 2020 was slightly over US\$271 billion.

Realizing that remittances constituted a significant economic resource for the country, the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party [Bộ Chính trị] issued Resolution No. 36 [*Nghị quyết số 36*] on March 26, 2004. The Resolution, namely 'Affairs relating to overseas Vietnamese' [*Công tác đối với người Việt Nam ở nước ngoài*], aims at promoting and strengthening the relationship between Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese. It proposes four directions [*Chủ trương, Phuong hướng*] and nine major tasks [*Nhiệm vụ chủ yếu*] in the policy on overseas Vietnamese.

Issued in 2004, the Resolution shows a significant transformation in the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party's approach to overseas Vietnamese. Since the post-reunification period, several distinct terms have been employed to refer to the same population. Before 1990, people who left the country by boat had been referred to by terms with negative connotations, such as boat people [*thuyền nhân*], refugees [*dân tị nạn*], and exiles [*ké lưu vong*]. Moreover, people caught fleeing the country were sentenced to several years in prison or reeducation camps, and their properties were confiscated. The stories of unsuccessful boat people and the traumatic experiences of the successful ones enlarged the gap between overseas Vietnamese and the current government of Vietnam. Carruthers (2001) described that before 1986, overseas Vietnamese were allowed to remit money and send gifts, but "the regime envisage no greater economic role for them than this" (p. 192). However, after the 6th Party Congress in 1986, when Vietnam applied the Open-door policy, there was a change in the terminology used to refer to the overseas Vietnamese returnees. The returnees have been called 'Việt kiều' or 'kiều bào ở nước ngoài' [overseas Vietnamese] with a positive connotation. Carruthers further noted that "Hanoi began to look towards the post-war diaspora as a source of capital for its program of economic revitalization" (p. 192).

After ten years, the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party assessed the achievement of the affair on overseas Vietnamese. It enacted the Directive (Chỉ thị) No. 45-CT/TW, dated May 19, 2015, on continuing to promote the implementation of Resolution No. 36-NQ/TW. It pointed out the weaknesses of the implementation in the past ten years on cultural preservation activities, the uncertainty of overseas Vietnamese in settlement countries, and the prejudice of some people toward the political system in Vietnam. Recently, the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party issued Conclusion No.12-KL/TW dated August 8, 2021, directing six tasks to deal with overseas Vietnamese in new situations. The tasks included an effective propaganda program, cooperating with government agencies in settlement countries to deal with the difficulties of Vietnamese people, promoting the solidarity of the Vietnamese nation, and preserving the Vietnamese language and culture. Many agendas have been made to showcase the thriving relationship between overseas Vietnamese and the homeland [*quê hương*]. Every Lunar New Year [*Tết Nguyên đán*], the prime minister and the president of Vietnam organized meetings with overseas Vietnamese, creating a warm spirit toward the inseparable part of Vietnam (Nguyen, 2022; State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese [SCOV], 2024).

The annual remittances to Vietnam caught the attention of Vietnamese American anti-communist media in the early 2000s. It was raised in media discussion among overseas Vietnamese in 2012. According to a Vietnamese American source,

The amount grew from US\$1 billion in 1999 to US\$9 billion in 2011. This amount puts Vietnam on the list of the top 16 remittance-receiving countries worldwide, arguably helping Vietnam's communist government acquire more foreign currency for the national reserve, reducing the national budget shortage, and balancing the trade deficit. ("Nguoi Viet Daily and the community," 2012)

However, these figures only represent the visible part of the iceberg. People from overseas have several ways of sending money home. Besides sending remittances through formal channels, they also bring cash when visiting Vietnam (Carruthers, 2001). Although the Vietnamese government set a limit of US\$7,000 per person (US\$5,000 since 2011) for the cash-carrying amount without a declaration requirement at the port of entry to Vietnam, the actual amount of carried cash remains unknown. Most of my respondents who had traveled to Vietnam stated that they had to spend approximately US\$20,000 (at the currency exchange rate of 2011-2012) for a three to four-week trip to Vietnam. Being seen as *Việt Kiều*, they also set a financial responsibility for themselves. Mrs. Lu, who made a few visits to Vietnam, told me,

*"I returned to visit my nephews and nieces, and I also traveled around Vietnam. It's not that I am rich, but I want to help the poor in Vietnam. When I was in Phan Thiết, I went out to give money to the poor, the elderly, and also my relatives."*

Vietnamese American media, including the Saigon Broadcasting Television Network (SBTN) and the Overseas Vietnamese Television (VHN-TV), ran advertisements and programs to discourage Vietnamese Americans from sending money to Vietnam. This was mainly because the funds would contribute to the prolongation of the communist regime in Vietnam. This diasporic anti-communist sentiment in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was also observed by Hoang (2016). Hoang suggested that reeducation camp prisoners, after resettling abroad, contributed to strengthening the political diasporic dimension and helped shape Little Saigon's anti-communism. During my fieldwork, a petition campaign was launched in April

2013 among Vietnamese Americans requesting the White House to issue an act limiting the practice of sending remittances to Vietnam due to the violation of human rights by the Vietnamese government.

The Voice of America Radio wrote that Vietnamese Americans who launched the petition campaign on April 12 argued that the annual remittances of overseas Vietnamese [*kiều bào*] brought to Vietnam from the visits and financial aid for relatives were so much that they were enough for the government of Vietnam to extend its violation of human rights and pay the national debt (Mi, 2013). They wanted the U.S. government to establish an office to monitor the overseas property of Americans, such as the one for Cuban refugees in 2004 under George W. Bush's presidency.

In supporting this idea, a Vietnamese American is quoted,

*"I totally agree with the petition. I think that Vietnamese people here [in the United States] also have to work hard to earn money. However, they have sent home too much. In fact, when I visited Vietnam a few years ago, I saw people spending that money wastefully. Therefore, if the U.S. government and President Obama issued a decree to limit this practice, I would appreciate it."*

A woman from the Netherlands said, "I support 100%. This is because we only see communists suppress ordinary people when we return to Vietnam. This is painful, so visiting Vietnam is not fun. If we continue to send money and visit Vietnam, it will be an indirect way of supporting communists. It would be great if this petition were widespread among many people. This could be an attack on communists" (Ái, 2013).

Although several overseas Vietnamese shared the ideas stated in the two direct quotes above, many others disagreed with this rigid notion. My interviews showed that although Vietnamese New Orleanians disliked the Vietnamese government, people still had relatives in Vietnam and thought that sending money to relatives was their responsibility. This was the case with Mrs. Tap, a first-generation individual working for a non-profit organization in New Orleans.

**Author:** I saw a TV debate on whether we should send money to relatives in Vietnam. What do you think of this?

**Tap:** I think, first, it is for our family; second, it helps improve the economic conditions of the Vietnamese. We should definitely help our families. When a family is better off, it contributes to the homeland.

**Author:** But I heard that people said sending money to Vietnam was a way to help the Vietnamese government.

**Tap:** We have to think about our family members who are living in critical conditions. If we don't send money to them, if we don't help them when they need it, we will lack mercy/clemency. I think it is difficult because if my parents were sick and in need of money, I would definitely send money to help them. They are my mom and dad; how can I ignore that? People who said that did not understand that there were people whose parents, spouses, or children were still in Vietnam. If something happened to

them, how could I not help them? But if money is used wastefully, it is the receiver's fault, not the regime's.

However, family members are primarily understood as parents, spouses, and siblings. Other relatives also receive gifts when overseas Vietnamese visit Vietnam. I was shown some gifts, including bottles of green oil, that people in Vietnam received from overseas relatives. My respondents in New Orleans spent more time caring for their parents than other members. Mr. Thien, born in 1961 and arriving in the United States in 1982, shared that

*"When my parents were alive, I sent money home every month. I have the opinion that my parents raised me, so I had the responsibility to help them. I think this is common among the Vietnamese. Once I got married and had children, I understood how much difficulty my parents had had to raise me, not to mention that they had to live in much worse conditions. So, I love my parents. I think that because I lived far from them, the only way I could help them was to send money home. I told my brother and sisters that you let me provide money, and you spent time caring for our parents."*

Mr. Thien expressed his gratitude to his parents by sending money home to his siblings to take care of them. He knew he could earn more than his siblings in Vietnam and was willing to provide financial assistance in exchange for his absence. For him, the filial piety of children should be shown to parents when parents need help. He expressed his disagreement with the call from the media not to send money home.

Like Mrs. Tap and Mr. Thien, Mrs. Phuoc, a member of the 1.5 generation, thought that the practice of traveling and sending money to Vietnam was a personal issue. She argued that

*"Sending money to families in Vietnam is a personal issue. However, this is not common. We can help family members in Vietnam if something happens to them. If someone dies and people have no money, they must send money home. Visiting Vietnam is also a personal choice. This is because we must spend money wherever we go; for instance, in Canada, France, or Australia, do we not spend money there? I think that is still a personal choice because wherever I go, I only think that I pay for the services I use. If you don't want to visit Vietnam, you can go elsewhere. This is America, so some people can't speak for everyone."*

These quotes show that Mr. Thien and Mrs. Phuoc did not refer to the existence of the Vietnamese government. Instead, they focused more on family issues and personal choices regarding these practices. For them, religious responsibility, filial piety, and individual choice were more important than concerns about Vietnam's government.

The practice of sending money home created social expectations for local people in Vietnam toward returnees. The images of *Việt Kiều* in those locations are people who have money and are generous. My landlord in Phan Thiết told me that Mrs. Lu, her aunt, often visited the parish and used to give money to her relatives. Moreover, this expectation of relatives in Vietnam has become a barrier preventing overseas Vietnamese from visiting their hometowns. Most of my respondents shared that they spent much money visiting Vietnam. Other respondents who had not made any trips to Vietnam explained that they did not have enough money to visit Vietnam. Mrs. Ky, an oyster shucker, commented

*"The first reason is that I don't have enough money, I have too many children, and my job pays cheaply. Second, close relatives, such as my parents, parents-in-law, and siblings, all live here. I only have cousins and relatives in Vietnam. But if I returned, I would have to give them gifts. Visiting them without gifts is uncomfortable. My parents were looked down upon because they sent little money, US\$100–200, to their relatives in Vietnam. People there said that my parents were 'fake Việt Kiều' [Việt kiều rởm]. Hearing that comment, I was afraid to return home. Even if I wanted to return, I would not have enough money."*

The practices of sending money home and visiting Vietnam have been common in New Orleans. Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans are closely connected to their relatives remaining in Vietnam. Familial responsibility and religious piety are the two main factors that tie overseas Vietnamese to their homeland. From a diaspora perspective, overseas Vietnamese hold strong memories of their homeland and are always willing to support religious institutions and people at home. The interviews show that Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans recognize their role as people of more privilege than their relatives in Vietnam. The remittances they send to their close relatives are sometimes seen as an exchange for the labor their siblings have spent caring for their parents. Even people without close relatives in Vietnam, like Mrs. Tap and Father Tran, have maintained sentiments and support for disadvantaged people in Vietnam. This confirms their position as members of a diasporic group relative to people in their home country.

## Conclusion

This is illustrated by the description of several transnational money transmittals, activities, and ideologies involving people in Vietnam and the United States since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. These transnational flows confirm that Vietnamese Americans have maintained long-distance relationships with their homeland. Familial responsibilities and collective memories of religious piety with Catholic home parishes are the primary resources that connect overseas Vietnamese to their homeland. Although overseas people and current priests at home did not know each other, the spiritual sentiment of having lived in the parish played a role in bridging stakeholders across national territories. Moreover, as Dorais (2001) conveyed, family relations, transnational or not, play a crucial part in defining Viet Kieu culture and social life; overseas Vietnamese recognize their privileged position and try to fulfill their familial responsibilities. Accordingly, a social expectation based on the idea that Vietnamese American returnees must be wealthier than people in Vietnam has formed among the relatives and homeland parishioners of Vietnamese Americans. Without comprehending the existing barriers in American society, including the lack of English competence, racial discrimination, and economic pressure, Vietnamese people in the homeland think of Vietnamese Americans as those who have fulfilled the American dream. This social expectation of the homeland has become a barrier preventing many overseas Vietnamese from returning to visit Vietnam.

Remittances sent to Vietnam by overseas Vietnamese have long been disputed in the diaspora. This article demonstrates two divergent attitudes toward this practice. The case of people in New Orleans suggests that relations with their home country are not a public matter for the entire Vietnamese diaspora. Sharing a similar perspective with Carruthers (2001, 2008), I suggest that Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans have not been constrained by group

sentiment in negotiating their relationship with Vietnam. Decisions to send remittances or undertake charity work in Vietnam are based on individual choices. Vietnamese New Orleanians originally from Phuoc Tinh and Phan Thiet express disagreements with the discourse on stopping the sending of money and visiting Vietnam. Anti-communist sentiments have considerably affected their experiences. Ultimately, however, Catholic responsibility, filial and familial duty, and personal choice are shown to be more central to their relationship with the homeland than political ideology.

Finally, while in this globalizing world, the nation-state cannot be confined within its physical boundaries and seeks to embrace its overseas citizens as a significant part of its economy (Basch et al., 1994), Vietnamese Americans have strived to prevent the homeland government from benefiting from the diaspora. Therefore, the increase of anti-communist activities in the diaspora after the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party's issuance of Resolution No. 36 (2004), then Directive No. 45 (2015), and Conclusion No.12 (2021) substantiates that instead of creating better conditions to embrace the large Vietnamese American population, the deterritorialization policy of the Vietnamese government has helped the Vietnamese diaspora renew their anti-communist sentiment and solidify their sense of themselves as exiles.

## Ethical clearance

University of Toronto (U of T) Research Ethics Boards REBs Protocol Reference # 26455.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the Harvard-Yenching Institute for supporting this PhD research at the University of Toronto (2009–2013).

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