The Vietnamese Diaspora in Udon Thani Province, Thailand: Their Multiple Roles in Peace and Conflict

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving roles of the Vietnamese diaspora (*Viet Kieu*) in Thailand in shaping conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding in Vietnam, as well as their influence on diplomatic relations between Thailand, the host country, and Vietnam, the home country, from the 1940s to the present. Despite its significance, this topic has received limited attention in diaspora studies. Employing transnational and peace and conflict approaches, the study analyzes the behavior of *Viet Kieu* amid global, regional, and national contextual shifts. Qualitative data were collected in Udon Thani province, northeast Thailand, through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Key findings reveal that before the 1990s, the Vietnamese community in northeast Thailand supported Vietnam's national liberation struggle while navigating Thai authorities' suspicion. Since the 1990s, they have made significant contributions to peacebuilding in Vietnam and strengthened diplomatic ties between Thailand and Vietnam. These insights enhance the theoretical understanding of diaspora roles in host-home country dynamics.

Keywords: Vietnamese diaspora, peace and conflict, transnationalism, flexibility, Udon Thani

Introduction

Diaspora communities—those who migrate from their homeland, settle permanently in a host country, and sustain enduring social, cultural, economic, and political ties with their place of origin—serve as critical actors in shaping the interplay of identity, migration, and geopolitics across borders (Schiller et al., 1992). These ties, encompassing remittances, cultural preservation, political advocacy, and familial networks, position diasporas as influential forces capable of either fueling conflict or fostering peace, often acting as bridges or points of tension between their host countries and their countries of origin. Their roles are neither uniform nor static; rather, they adapt to shifting historical, political, and social contexts, reflecting a dynamic capacity to influence transnational relations. The Vietnamese diaspora, commonly referred to as *Viet Kieu*, exemplifies this complexity with striking clarity. The present study focuses on the *Viet Kieu* in Thailand, specifically in Udon Thani province in the northeastern Isaan region, a community of people of Vietnamese descent who have resided in Thailand for generations and now hold Thai citizenship. Their journey—from clandestine supporters of Vietnam's revolutionary struggles during the mid-20th century to active contributors to contemporary Thailand-Vietnam diplomatic and economic

relations—offers a compelling case for exploring how diasporas navigate and shape peace and conflict processes over time.

Academic interest in the *Viet Kieu* emerged in the 1980s, initially focusing on Western contexts such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, where refugees fleeing the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and its aftermath established vibrant enclaves (Valverde, 2002). These studies explored themes of displacement, cultural adaptation, and identity negotiation amid the pressures of the Cold War. Since the 2010s, scholarly attention has expanded to include Asian settings, notably Thailand, with research focusing on migration histories, cultural preservation efforts, and transnational linkages (Trinh and Sripana, 2006; Watrasoke et al., 2015; Phan, 2016). Despite this growing body of works, a critical dimension remains underexplored: the specific roles of *Viet Kieu* in the dynamics of peace and conflict between their host country (Thailand) and home country (Vietnam) have received scant attention. Existing scholarship often prioritizes cultural identity, economic contributions, or historical migration patterns over their political agency, leaving a significant gap in understanding how they influenced conflict and peacebuilding across decades. This omission is particularly striking given *Viet Kieu*'s unique position at the intersection of Thailand's anti-communist policies and Vietnam's revolutionary struggles, followed by their later integration into a reconciled regional framework.

Diasporas wield considerable influence in global conflict and peacebuilding, a duality well-documented across diverse cases. On the one hand, they can exacerbate tensions by channeling resources to homeland conflicts—the Tamil diaspora, for example, provided substantial financial support to Sri Lanka's civil war, sustaining a prolonged insurgency (Toivanen and Baser, 2019). On the other hand, diasporas can support post-conflict recovery, as evidenced by the Bosnian diaspora's contributions to Bosnia's reconstruction through economic aid and advocacy following the 1992-1995 war (Rigby, 2006). These contrasting roles highlight the importance of contextual analysis, recognizing that diaspora actions are shaped by specific historical and geopolitical conditions rather than being confined to fixed categorizations as agents of disruption or harmony. The *Viet Kieu* in Thailand offer a rich case study: their contributions shifted from supporting Vietnam's wars of liberation in the 1950s-1970s, under intense scrutiny from the Thai government, to enhancing bilateral ties in the post-1990s era, reflecting changes in regional dynamics, state policies, and their own evolving legal status. This adaptability underscores their potential to illuminate broader patterns of diaspora behavior in host-home country relations.

This study addresses two core questions: 1) What roles have the *Viet Kieu* in Udon Thani played in conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding processes between Vietnam and Thailand since the 1950s? and 2) How have they expressed these roles to forge connections between their host and home countries across these decades? We argue that their contributions evolved dynamically, driven by agency—their intentional actions within structural constraints—and shaped by broader conditions, including Cold War tensions, Thailand's shifting political landscape, and Vietnam's post-war transformation. Focusing on Udon Thani, home to a significant *Viet Kieu* population estimated at 10,000, we trace their trajectory from the 1940s to the present, spanning over seven decades of settlement and adaptation. This provincial lens enables a detailed examination of local experiences within national and transnational frameworks, providing insights applicable to diaspora studies worldwide.

The historical context of Vietnamese migration to Thailand provides an essential backdrop. Scholars identify four waves, with this study centering on the 1946 influx, when approximately 40,000 Vietnamese fled the First Indochina War (1946-1954) to escape French colonial oppression and a

devastating famine that killed over a million in northern Vietnam's Red River Delta (Trinh and Sripana, 2006). Settling in northeastern provinces like Udon Thani, Nong Khai, and Sakon Nakhon, these refugees—mostly peasants and laborers—were initially tolerated under Thailand's civilian government (1946-1947), led by Prime Minister Pridi Banomyong, who permitted their settlement as a humanitarian gesture. However, military coups in 1947 aligned Thailand with the U.S.-led anti-communist bloc, casting the *Viet Kieu* as suspect due to their support for North Vietnam's communist regime. During the Vietnam War, Thailand's role as a U.S. ally—hosting key air bases like the one in Udon Thani, a hub for bombing missions—intensified restrictions on their movement, cultural expression, and economic opportunities, a repression that persisted into the 1980s amid Vietnam-Thailand tensions over Cambodia. A pivotal shift occurred in the 1990s, driven by Vietnam's Doi Moi economic reforms (1986), its withdrawal from Cambodia (1989), and its ASEAN membership (1995), alongside Thailand's policy under Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan to transform Indochina into a marketplace. Bilateral agreements in the mid-1990s granted citizenship to many second-generation *Viet Kieu*, marking their transition from marginalized outsiders to integrated contributors to both nations.

Unlike their Western counterparts—often anti-communist refugees who fled Vietnam after 1975—the Thai *Viet Kieu* historically aligned with Vietnam's revolutionary cause, a stance rooted in Thailand's legacy as a sanctuary for anti-colonial figures like Phan Boi Chau and Ho Chi Minh, who organized resistance from Thai soil in the early 20th century (Goscha, 1999). This pro-communist orientation, contrasting sharply with the anti-communist narratives of *Viet Kieu* in the United States or Australia, positions them uniquely to explore how diasporas navigate conflicting loyalties between host and home countries. Their experience—caught between Thailand's anti-communist regime and Vietnam's communist struggle—offers a lens into the mechanisms of diaspora agency across distinct phases: conflict support during the 1950s-1970s and peacebuilding from the 1990s onward.

We integrate two theoretical frameworks to unpack this narrative. The primary lens is the transnational approach (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998), which highlights their cross-border connections, from wartime networks to peacetime associations. The other is the peace and conflict approach (Oishi, 2020; Woods, 2011), which offers a supplementary perspective by examining strategies for managing incompatibilities, such as incompatible goals between the *Viet Kieu* and its host country and the peace process between Thailand and Vietnam with the *Viet Kieu* contributing to their economic integration.

These lenses illuminate *the dual embeddedness of Viet Kieu in Thailand and Vietnam, revealing how they transitioned* from covert operations under repression to public roles in a reconciled era. Qualitative data from Udon Thani—gathered through participant observation, interviews with 15 second-generation *Viet Kieu*, and document analysis—form the empirical foundation, detailed in the methodology section. The article proceeds with a literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion, aiming to enhance diaspora studies by foregrounding the political agency and contextual responsiveness of *Viet Kieu*, with implications for understanding similar communities worldwide.

A Review of Literature and Theoretical Concepts

The Vietnamese diaspora's engagement in peace and conflict processes has received limited scholarly attention despite a substantial and growing body of research on their migration history, cultural identity, and transnational activities worldwide. This gap persists even as existing studies provide critical contexts for understanding their historical and contemporary roles, offering a foundation that this research builds

upon to address their political agency—an aspect often overshadowed by cultural or economic foci. Early works, while insightful, tend to concentrate on broader revolutionary networks, state-driven dynamics, or cultural preservation rather than the *Viet Kieu*'s specific contributions to conflict and peacebuilding, leaving a critical dimension of their story untold. For instance, Goscha (1999) delivers an exhaustive account of the Southeast Asian networks of Vietnamese revolutionaries from 1885 to 1954, detailing how patriots leveraged Thailand as a strategic base to coordinate anti-French activities across southern China, Hong Kong, and beyond. His analysis highlights the clandestine operations of figures like Phan Boi Chau, who arrived in Thailand in 1908 after escaping French arrest in Vietnam, establishing exile communities in northeastern provinces like Udon Thani to plan uprisings and publish revolutionary tracts such as *Hai Ngoai Huyet Thu* (Overseas Blood Letter)—a call to arms that circulated widely among Vietnamese migrants. Goscha also traces Ho Chi Minh's brief stay in Thailand in 1928-1929, where he organized communist cells among Vietnamese laborers in villages near Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani, laying the groundwork for the Indochina Communist Party. This work is rich in historical detail, tracing the movement of ideas, resources, and people across borders via steamships and overland routes. Still, it centers on elite networks and revolutionary leadership, focusing on how Phan and Ho mobilized intellectuals and soldiers, and offers little insight into the broader diaspora's role, particularly the everyday contributions of ordinary *Viet Kieu* beyond their association with these iconic figures.

Trinh and Sripana (2006) adopt a broader historical lens, examining *Viet Kieu*'s presence in Thailand-Vietnam relations from the 1940s to the 2000s—a period spanning World War II's aftermath, the Cold War's ideological battles, and post-Cold War reconciliation efforts in Southeast Asia. Their study traces the community's evolution from refugees fleeing war to integrated citizens contributing to bilateral ties, emphasizing how Thailand and Vietnam strategically engaged the *Viet Kieu* in diplomatic maneuvers across these decades. For example, they document how Thailand used the *Viet Kieu* as leverage in negotiations with Vietnam during the 1970s, portraying them as a potential security threat to pressure Vietnam into concessions during the Vietnam War and subsequent Cambodia conflict—such as threatening mass deportation in 1972 to secure border agreements. Conversely, Vietnam later courted their support for post-war reconstruction efforts in the 1980s and 1990s, appealing to their nationalist sentiments through state-sponsored visits (e.g. inviting *Viet Kieu* leaders to Hanoi in 1988) and propaganda via Radio Hanoi, which urged financial contributions. This analysis sheds light on the geopolitical chessboard on which the *Viet Kieu* were positioned, highlighting their role as pawns in state strategies—Thailand's 1970s Internal Security Operations Command labeled them "communist infiltrators," while Vietnam's 1980s Overseas Vietnamese Committee hailed them as "patriotic bridges." However, it prioritizes state-driven strategies over the community's agency, leaving their independent actions in peace and conflict processes—such as organizing secret support networks or fostering grassroots peace initiatives—largely unexamined, reducing them to passive actors rather than proactive contributors with their own motivations and methods.

Similarly, Amnuayngerntra (2016) focuses on the formation and development of the Vietnamese community in Udon Thani, documenting their settlement patterns, economic activities, and eventual role in fostering Thailand-Vietnam ties through cultural and economic exchanges. The study details how the 1946 wave established rural hamlets in Udon Thani's outskirts—small clusters of bamboo houses along the Huai Luang River—transitioning from subsistence farming (e.g. rice paddies) to small-scale trade (e.g. selling rice noodles or crafting bamboo furniture) by the 1960s, before expanding into urban markets

like steel trading by the 1980s as Thailand's economy grew. It also notes their post-1990s contributions, such as organizing trade fairs with Vietnamese firms that brought in goods like textiles and electronics, boosting local commerce. Yet, Amnuayngerntra overlooks the specific strategies they employed during periods of conflict—such as smuggling resources to Vietnam, or peacebuilding, such as mediating diplomatic visits—limiting the study's depth and leaving key questions about their political roles unanswered beyond economic survival and adaptation. More recent scholarship shifts toward contemporary dynamics but retains a narrow scope that sidesteps the peace-conflict nexus. Promseangsing and Laochankham (2023) investigate the Vietnamese Association in Udon Thani, exploring its role in unifying the community, expanding Thai-Vietnamese business networks, and adapting to current social, cultural, and political contexts. Their analysis highlights the association's organizational success in coordinating trade initiatives and cultural events. The authors focus on present-day management rather than its historical roots in conflict support (e.g. wartime fundraising) or its broader contributions to peacebuilding over time (e.g. facilitating state visits).

Other studies, such as those by Watrasoke et al. (2015) and Phan (2016), explore cultural identity and transnational connectivity among the Thai-based *Viet Kieu*, offering complementary perspectives but similarly neglecting their political roles. Watrasoke et al. (2015) examine how monuments and museums in Udon Thani, such as the Ho Chi Minh Historical Site which opened in 2001 with Thai government support, construct a narrative of Vietnamese national salvation—featuring exhibits of Ho's writings, his wooden chair from 1928, and photos of his Thai hosts—reinforcing the community's historical memory and pride as descendants of anti-colonial fighters. Phan (2016) analyzes the cross-border ties of *Viet Kieu* with Vietnam, detailing how advances in communication (e.g. affordable phone calls since the 1990s, replacing costly telegrams) and travel (e.g. direct flights from Bangkok to Hanoi after 2000) have strengthened economic and familial links between Udon Thani-based Vietnamese and Vietnam. While valuable, these works emphasize cultural preservation and historical continuity over the *Viet Kieu*'s political or peace-related roles, leaving a critical gap in the literature that this study seeks to address by foregrounding their agency in peace and conflict processes across seven decades.

The present article bridges this lacuna by integrating two analytical lenses—transnational and peace and conflict approaches—to examine the *Viet Kieu* in Udon Thani from the 1940s to the present. We position them as adaptive actors whose roles shifted from conflict supporters during the Indochina and Vietnam Wars (1950s-1970s), when they risked imprisonment to aid Vietnam's liberation, to peacebuilders amid improved Thailand-Vietnam relations (1990s-present), where they leveraged citizenship to foster cooperation. This flexibility reflects their evolving political status—from refugees under suspicion, branded as "red threats" in Thai military reports, to citizens with agency, celebrated as cultural ambassadors in Thai media—and the changing diplomatic landscape between their host and home countries, shaped by Cold War divisions and post-Cold War integration via ASEAN. By tracing these shifts, we aim to enrich the theoretical understanding of diaspora roles in peace-conflict nexuses, moving beyond the cultural and transnational foci that dominate existing scholarship to highlight their political agency and contributions across time.

Diaspora studies define these communities as groups that migrate and settle permanently in a host country, often acquiring legal citizenship, while sustaining multifaceted ties with their homeland—ties that span economic, political, and socio-cultural domains and endure across generations (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998). Thus, it is rational to analyze diaspora-related issues through a transnational lens.

Transnationalism, described by Faist (2010) as a "dancing partner" to diaspora, emerged as a framework with the advent of modern transport and communication technologies in the 20th century—steamships, telegraphs, and later airplanes, phones, and the internet—which facilitated the creation and maintenance of cross-border networks (Portes et al., 1999). For the *Viet Kieu* in Thailand, transnationalism manifests in two distinct phases. First, it is their historical support for Vietnam's revolutionary struggles through clandestine remittances and networks during the 1950s-1970s, when physical distance was overcome through secretive coordination via messengers on foot or sampans along the Mekong. Second, it accounts for their later contributions to bilateral development through trade, cultural exchange, and diplomacy from the 1990s onward, enabled by modern infrastructure such as highways connecting Udon Thani to Laos and Vietnam, as well as telecommunications that reduced the distance between Udon Thani and Hanoi from weeks to seconds.

Scholars such as Brinkerhoff (2011) and Van Hear and Cohen (2017) argue that diasporas can influence conflict or peace, depending on their resources and circumstances, a duality evident in global examples that highlight their dual potential. They may provide economic remittances—such as the Tamil diaspora's funding of Sri Lanka's civil war, estimated at $200 million annually at its peak, channeled through Tamil organizations in Canada and the United Kingdom via fundraising dinners and coerced donations—or human resources, as when the Somali diaspora sent fighters and organizers to Somalia's conflicts in the 1990s via recruitment drives in Minneapolis or London, with over 200 youth returning by 1995. Alternatively, they can contribute to peace through philanthropy, as seen with the Bosnian diaspora's support for Bosnia's post-war recovery—raising $50 million in the late 1990s for schools and hospitals in cities like Sarajevo—or political advocacy, as with the Acholi diaspora's role in Uganda's reconciliation efforts by lobbying the United Nations and the European Union (EU) for peace talks in the early 2000s, securing mediation in 2006. Horst et al. (2010) and Sökefeld (2006) emphasize the importance of analyzing these roles within the interplay of host and home country dynamics, as well as broader global contexts, such as Cold War alliances or globalization's economic flows. Home states often engage diasporas in national policies to harness their resources. Vietnam, for instance, mobilized its overseas communities during its liberation struggles through propaganda broadcasts on Radio Hanoi and letters from Ho Chi Minh calling for gold donations, raising millions in the 1960, while host states' policies shaped their political space. Thailand's initial restrictions on the *Viet Kieu*, such as travel bans between provinces and cultural suppression during the 1950s-1970s, contrasted sharply with its later acceptance, exemplified by citizenship grants in the 1990s and local government partnerships for cultural events, illustrating how host-country attitudes influence diaspora behavior over time.

Globalization further complicates these dynamics, as diasporas operate within transnational fields that transcend simple host-home binaries, integrating regional and global networks into their actions. *Viet Kieu* connections with Laos during the Vietnam War, for instance, highlight how regional networks—facilitated by shared borders, ethnic ties between Vietnamese minorities in Laos and Thailand, and the Mekong River's trade routes—amplify their influence beyond Thailand and Vietnam. During the 1960s and 1970s, *Viet Kieu* in Laos acted as intermediaries, sending goods like rice and gold from Thailand to Vietnam's northern frontlines via Lao mule trails, a role enabled by familial and linguistic ties across the region. Many spoke both Vietnamese and Lao dialects as they migrated to Laos before becoming refugees in Thailand due to the escalation of the First Indochina War. This multi-scalar embeddedness—local (e.g. Udon Thani's community life, with its markets and temples), national (e.g. Thai and Vietnamese

policies), and transnational (e.g. ties with Laos)—requires a nuanced approach to understanding their roles, one that accounts for both agency and structural constraints. The *Viet Kieu*'s ability to shift from covert wartime support to overt peacetime contributions is driven by changes in technology (e.g. the development of telecommunication and transportation), diplomacy (e.g. ASEAN integration after 1995), and their legal status (e.g. citizenship that grants voting rights and property ownership).

On the other hand, Oishi's (2020) peace and conflict framework provides a complementary lens to the transnational lens, centering on incompatibility—defined as clashes in goals or positions between parties that cannot coexist without negation, such as ideological opposition (communism vs. anti-communism) or territorial disputes (e.g. Cambodia's borders). Identifying and managing incompatibility is critical to conflict management or peacebuilding, achievable through six distinct strategies: 1) elimination of one or more parties as carriers of incompatible positions or goals; 2) imposition of one party's position on the other; 3) a legal approach where parties seek legal entitlement to their positions or goals through mechanisms like the International Court of Justice (ICJ); 4) narrowing the gap between incompatible positions or goals; 5) closing the gap entirely between incompatible positions or goals; or 6) maneuvering around incompatible positions or goals while avoiding direct clashes and awaiting their eventual dissolution over time. The present study refines this approach by integrating two key perspectives: Oishi's own "incompatibility management" and Woods' "ceasefire capitalism," which together form the backbone of our peace and conflict analysis of the *Viet Kieu* in Udon Thani.

The "incompatibility management" perspective emphasizes strategies to address or mitigate incompatibilities without necessarily resolving them outright. A prominent strategy within this framework is the "maneuvering around" (strategy 6), where parties navigate irreconcilable differences—such as opposing political ideologies or goals—by finding indirect ways to coexist or pursue their objectives without direct confrontation. For the *Viet Kieu*, this strategy was pivotal during the 1950s-1970s, when their pro-communist stance clashed with Thailand's anti-communist regime, which was aligned with the United States and hosted U.S. military bases like Udon Thani's, which launched B-52 bombing runs on Hanoi. Rather than openly challenging Thai authorities, the *Viet Kieu* maneuvered around this incompatibility through covert tactics—secret associations, cultural disguises like the "Fatherland Altar" (explained later) and coded resource campaigns—allowing them to support Vietnam's liberation struggles while minimizing direct conflict with Thailand's repressive policies.

Complementing this, Woods' (2011) concept of "ceasefire capitalism" frames economic integration as a mechanism for sustaining peace in post-conflict settings, where former adversaries shift from violence to profit-driven cooperation, often under the facilitation of states or markets. This perspective is particularly relevant to the role of *Viet Kieu* from the 1990s onward, as Thailand and Vietnam transitioned from Cold War enmity to a regional partnership under ASEAN. With Vietnam's Doi Moi reforms (1986) opening its economy and Thailand's marketplace policy under Chatichai Choonhavan, the *Viet Kieu* leveraged their citizenship and transnational networks to drive economic ties—such as steel trade and cultural exchanges—transforming potential conflict into mutual benefit. Ceasefire capitalism thus recasts their economic contributions as a peacebuilding tool, aligning their goals with both nations' interests in stability and growth.

For the *Viet Kieu*, the tension arising from incompatibility with Thailand's anti-communist regime during the 1950s-1970s necessitated secretive strategies to maneuver around Thai restrictions, sustaining

their activities while avoiding repression, arrest, or deportation under the 1950s Internal Security Act. By the 1990s, improved diplomatic relations—marked by Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia (1989), its ASEAN membership (1995), and Thailand's economic outreach—had dissipated this incompatibility, enabling the *Viet Kieu* to adopt public, constructive roles. Here, ceasefire capitalism took hold, as economic integration through trade and development initiatives fostered peace, aligning their efforts with a reconciled regional framework.

The peace and conflict approach, enriched by these perspectives and paired with the transnational approach, explains how the *Viet Kieu* adapted their strategies over time and across different contexts with remarkable resilience. During the conflict phase, they maneuvered around incompatibility through clandestine networks—smuggling gold, rice, and funds via Laos—while in the peacebuilding phase, ceasefire capitalism facilitated public organizations in fostering bilateral ties through economic and cultural collaboration. This adaptability highlights their agency within structural constraints shaped by local conditions, national policies, and transnational networks, offering a nuanced lens for understanding their dual roles in conflict and peace.

Research Methodology

This study is grounded in qualitative data collected in Udon Thani, a province in Thailand's northeastern Isaan region, renowned for its significant Vietnamese population and its deep historical and ongoing ties to Vietnam. The primary fieldwork was conducted from January to September, 2020 (Nguyen, 2021; Tu Anh, 2021), spanning nine months of intensive data collection in the field. Supplementary data were gathered in late 2023 and early 2024, over three additional months, to capture recent developments and ensure the study's relevance to contemporary dynamics as of April 2025. Udon Thani was selected as the primary field site for three compelling and interconnected reasons, each underscoring its suitability for exploring diaspora roles in peace and conflict over seven decades of settlement.

The first reason is that Udon Thani hosts one of Thailand's largest Vietnamese populations, estimated at approximately 15,000 individuals (*The Nation*, 2022), a figure rooted in the 1946 migration wave and sustained through generational continuity, intermarriage with local Thais, and a stable birth rate despite initial hardships. This concentration makes it a vital hub for *Viet Kieu* activities, ranging from cultural preservation efforts, such as maintaining Vietnamese language schools since the 2000s, to economic initiatives that connect Thailand and Vietnam, including food and daily product trading networks. The community's size and cohesion provide a rich and diverse dataset for analyzing their evolving roles across time, from wartime resistance to peacetime collaboration. Second, Udon Thani has a well-documented history of nationalist activism during the 1940s-1970s, when the *Viet Kieu* supported Vietnam's liberation struggles from afar (Sripana, 2004). This period of long-distance nationalism, marked by clandestine support for North Vietnam's anti-colonial and communist causes—such as sending gold and rice to Ho Chi Minh's forces—offers a critical window into their conflict-related roles, driven by a pro-communist stance and resistance to Thai repression under military rule that saw hundreds jailed or deported. Third, since the 1990s, the *Viet Kieu* in Udon Thani have maintained active transnational ties with Vietnam while integrating into Thai society, exemplified by their acquisition of Thai citizenship in the mid-1990s and their contributions to bilateral relations through trade, cultural exchange, and diplomacy (Phan, 2016). Projects like the Ho Chi Minh Historical Site and Vietnam Town illustrate this

dual role, positioning Udon Thani as an ideal case for studying the transition from conflict support to peacebuilding within a single diaspora community across distinct historical phases.

Data collection employed three complementary qualitative methods—participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis—each designed to capture distinct facets of the *Viet Kieu*'s experiences and provide a comprehensive view of their roles across historical and contemporary contexts, triangulating personal narratives with observable behaviors and archival evidence. Participant observation was conducted during the nine-month fieldwork period in 2020, encompassing a range of community events that provided insights into both daily life and significant cultural moments. These observations, meticulously documented through field notes and occasional photographs (with consent), provided insights into the community's daily practices, social interactions, and expressions of identity in both public and private settings. For example, observing the annual commemoration of Ho Chi Minh's death on September 2, 2020 revealed how historical memory continues to shape their identity—elders recited his poems like "The Road to Liberation," youth laid flowers at his statue, and speeches emphasized his legacy as a unifier—while attending association meetings offered a glimpse into their organizational strategies and interactions with local Thai officials, such as negotiating permits for Vietnam Town events with the Udon Thani Municipality.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 second-generation *Viet Kieu*, aged 60 to over 70 years, who were born in Thailand between 1946 and 1955, during the 1946 migrant wave. This generation was deliberately chosen for their firsthand experiences across two distinct historical phases: the conflict period of the 1950s-1970s, characterized by Thailand's anti-communist policies and Vietnam's wars—when they were teenagers hiding donations from Thai patrols—and the peacebuilding period from the 1990s onward, marked by integration and citizenship following the 1995 citizenship grants that transformed their legal status. The sample was selected through snowball sampling, a method well-suited for accessing tight-knit communities where trust is paramount, and initial contacts (e.g. a respected teacher, Ms. An) recommended others after vouching for the researcher's intent. It included seven women and eight men with diverse backgrounds: retired market sellers who once traded rice and vegetables in Udon Thani's central market (e.g. Ms. Hoa, who sold 50 kilos daily in the 1970s), businesspersons such as steel product traders (e.g. Mr. Kien, whose company imports steel-roll-forming machines from Vietnam and produces steel products serving the construction sector in Udon Thani) and restaurant owners serving Vietnamese cuisine (e.g. Mr. Thai whose Vietnamese food restaurant serves more than a hundred customers daily), teachers at the community's Vietnamese language school (e.g. Ms. An, who taught 50 students in 2020), and leaders of social, cultural, and community associations like the Vietnamese-Thai Association and Business Association of Thailand and Vietnam (BAOTV) (e.g. Mr. Phuc, president of Vietnamese-Thai Association since 2015). This diversity ensured a broad range of perspectives on the community's evolving roles, from grassroots contributors who donated rice in the 1960s to influential organizers shaping trade policies in the 2020s.

Interviews, conducted in Vietnamese, lasted between one and two hours—sometimes extending to three hours when respondents shared detailed stories, like Mr. Quang's three-hour recounting of a 1971 campaign—and were recorded with informed consent using a digital recorder, later transcribed verbatim. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit rich, detailed narratives, exploring their memories of wartime support (e.g. "How did your family contribute to Vietnam's struggles, and what risks did you face under Thai surveillance-like raids or arrests?"), strategies for navigating Thai suspicion (e.g. "How did you

maintain your culture or organize support under restrictions—were there secret codes, hiding places, or disguises?"), and contributions to post-1990s peacebuilding (e.g. "What role do you play in Thailand-Vietnam relations today, and how has citizenship changed your life, your family's opportunities, or your sense of belonging?"). Respondents like Ms. An, a 72-year-old retired market seller and teacher, provided vivid accounts of hiding Ho Chi Minh's portrait in Buddhist altars during Thai searches in the 1960s—placing it behind a Buddha statue with incense to mask its presence—while Mr. Phuc, a 62-year-old association president, detailed his role in coordinating Vietnamese officials' visits, assigning translators for Thai audiences at a trade summit in 2020. To protect privacy, pseudonyms were assigned, and sensitive details—such as specific family histories (e.g. names of jailed relatives), or exact locations of secret meetings (e.g. a barn near Ban Nong Wua So)—were anonymized in the analysis to safeguard respondents from potential social or legal repercussions, even decades later, given lingering sensitivities around communism in Thailand.

Document analysis supplemented primary data, drawing on a variety of sources to provide historical and contextual depth beyond oral accounts and observations. These included community records, which outlined their transition from secret to public operations and listed early initiatives; and historical accounts from Thai and Vietnamese archives, such as 1950s Thai newspapers like *Siam Rath* reporting on "communist threats" in the northeast (e.g. a 1958 article citing 200 arrests) and Vietnamese state documents from the Hanoi Archives praising overseas support (e.g. a 1970 memo thanking "Thai brothers" for one million THB). Supplementary data collected in 2023-2024 included updates on association activities, such as the latest cultural projects undertaken by the *Viet Kieu*, and economic developments, including the growth of the *Viet Kieu*-dominated steel product market in Udon Thani, which employs hundreds of local residents. These documents ensured that the study reflects both historical trajectories and contemporary trends, grounding personal narratives in verifiable records that span 70 years.

The sample size of 15 interviewees is relatively small compared to the broader *Viet Kieu* population in Udon Thani, estimated at 15,000, which limits the study's generalizability to the entire community or other Vietnamese diaspora groups settling in other provinces in Thailand. However, the focus on second-generation narratives enables a deep, longitudinal analysis of the community's 70-year trajectory, capturing shifts from conflict to peacebuilding through rich, lived experiences rather than broad statistical trends that might dilute individual voices or obscure historical nuance. Data reliability was enhanced through triangulation, cross-referencing interview accounts with observational field notes and archival documents to ensure consistency. For instance, Ms. An's recollection of secret remittances during the 1970s—hiding gold in rice sacks under banana leaves—was corroborated by association records mentioning "donations to the homeland" (e.g. a 1972 entry citing 50 ounces), while Mr. Quang's account of the "Flower Blossoming Campaign" aligned with Thai newspaper reports of *Viet Kieu* gatherings in 1971 (e.g. *Bangkok Post* noting "unusual activity" in Udon Thani). Analysis involved thematic coding using qualitative software (NVivo), identifying key themes such as "conflict support strategies" (e.g. altars, smuggling), "peacebuilding contributions" (e.g. trade, translation), "transnational networks" (e.g. Lao links), and "identity negotiation" (e.g. dual allegiance), followed by interpretation within the peace-conflict and transnational frameworks to draw out their implications.

This methodology strikes a balance between depth and specificity, providing a robust foundation for understanding the *Viet Kieu*'s evolving roles across decades in a single locale. While the study's focus

on Udon Thani precludes broader claims about all *Viet Kieu* in Thailand—whose experiences might vary by region (e.g. urban Bangkok *Viet Kieu* faced less rural isolation)—it provides a detailed case study that illuminates patterns of diaspora agency and adaptation with potential relevance to similar communities globally, such as the Hmong diaspora in Laos and the United States or the Tibetan diaspora in India and Nepal. The combination of firsthand narratives, observational insights, and archival evidence ensures a comprehensive exploration of their contributions to peace and conflict, grounded in both historical context and present-day realities as of April 2025.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the *Viet Kieu* in Udon Thani as dynamic actors whose roles in peace and conflict evolved significantly from the 1940s to the present, shaped by shifting local, national, and transnational contexts that ranged from Cold War hostilities to post-Cold War cooperation. Drawing on participant observation, in-depth interviews with 15 second-generation *Viet Kieu* conducted in 2020, and document analysis spanning 1940s Thai newspapers to 2024 association reports, we present these findings in three parts: their role in the diaspora-conflict nexus during the 1950s-1970s, their contributions as development actors from the 1990s onward, and a synthesis of their flexible roles across these periods. This expanded discussion delves deeply into their strategies, motivations, personal narratives, and the interplay of individual and collective agency, offering a comprehensive portrait of their resilience and adaptability over seven decades in Thailand's northeast.

The 1950s-1970s: *Viet Kieu* in the Diaspora-Conflict Nexus

The period from the 1950s to the 1970s was a defining and deeply challenging era for the second-generation *Viet Kieu* in Udon Thani, born between 1946 and 1955 to refugees who arrived in 1946 fleeing the First Indochina War (1946-1954). These migrants initially found a cautious welcome under Thailand's civilian government (1946-1947), led by Pridi Banomyong, a leftist who permitted their settlement as part of a humanitarian response to the war's displacement. However, this openness evaporated after a series of military coups in 1947, led by Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, shifted Thailand's political landscape toward an anti-communist stance, aligning the country with the United States amid the escalating Cold War following the 1949 Chinese Communist victory and the 1950 Korean War outbreak. This shift ushered in a repressive regime that viewed the *Viet Kieu* with deep suspicion, particularly due to their overt support for North Vietnam's communist regime under President Ho Chi Minh.

Thailand's anti-communist policies were rigorous and far-reaching, designed to neutralize perceived threats in a region bordering communist Laos and Vietnam. Travel restrictions confined the *Viet Kieu* to their provinces. Public expressions of Vietnamese culture, such as speaking Vietnamese or performing Vietnamese traditional songs openly, were outlawed. Celebrations of *Tet* were restricted to private *Viet Kieu* homes. Access to education and employment was curtailed. The jobs beyond farming or market vending were denied, relegating most *Viet Kieu* to low-wage labor. The hostility lingered into the 1980s, exacerbated by Vietnam-Thailand tensions over Vietnam's 1978 troop deployment to unseat the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

Despite being born on Thai soil and never setting foot in Vietnam until decades later—most first visited in the 1990s—the second-generation *Viet Kieu* identified North Vietnam as their homeland, a sentiment deeply ingrained by their parents' narratives of exile and reinforced by Thailand's hostile environment that branded them outsiders. This alienation fueled their active participation in Vietnam's liberation struggles, encompassing both the First Indochina War against French colonial rule (ending with Dien Bien Phu in 1954) and the Vietnam War against U.S.-backed South Vietnam (ending with Saigon's fall in 1975). Their support was not a passive gesture but a highly organized endeavor, orchestrated through a clandestine, hierarchical community's association that interviewees described as a "small government." Directed by a secret national *Viet Kieu* network spanning Thailand's northeast—linking Udon Thani to Nong Khai, Sakon Nakhon, and beyond—this body coordinated a wide range of activities: patriotic education for youth through secret classes held in barns, and the systematic collection of resources to aid Vietnam's war efforts, a logistical feat under Thai surveillance.

The association's structure was meticulously designed to operate covertly. Villages were subdivided into hamlets, each with leaders who were wise intellectuals and appointed by the Overseas Vietnamese Association in Thailand. They were known only among the Viet Kieu but remained unidentified outside the group. Those leaders took charge of various tasks, including education, youth development, women's development, Vietnam-Thailand relations development, and propaganda for patriotism. This top-down communication ensured efficiency and secrecy, critical in a context where open support for communism could lead to arrest. Strategies were both practical and culturally adaptive, reflecting *the ingenuity of the Viet Kieu.* The "Fatherland Altar," introduced in 1956 and maintained through 1975, was a prominent tactic: Ho Chi Minh's portrait sat at its center, flanked by an incense bowl and bordered by Vietnamese messages praising patriotism. By framing it as a religious altar, a sacred object in Thai culture, the *Viet Kieu* protected it from removal during Thai campaigns to eradicate communist symbols—soldiers hesitated to desecrate what appeared holy. Ms. An explained, "The altar was our shield. We'd light incense and pray aloud for 'peace,' but it was for Vietnam's victory. The soldiers never caught on."

Mobilization campaigns further demonstrated their commitment and organizational capacity. The "Golden Week," modeled after North Vietnam's fundraising drives, collected gold donations from households willing to part with heirlooms. The "Jar of Rice for Feeding Soldiers" encouraged families to set aside a bowl of rice daily amassing stores that were smuggled out in sacks and sent to Laos and Vietnam later. The most ambitious effort was the "Flower Blossoming Campaign" in the 1970s, which used a floral metaphor to categorize donations: a "flower" equaled 10,000 THB, a "leaf" 1,000 THB, and a "bud" 5,000 THB. Mr. Quang (pseudonym), a 72-year-old retired trader, recounted, "Even the poorest gave a bud—maybe a day's earnings—while the wealthier gave flowers. We sent over a million baht to Vietnam, plus gold and rice."

A 1971 assembly in Udon Thani, held covertly in a remote hamlet under the guise of a family wedding, marked the campaign's climax—a moment that the *Viet Kieu* saw as a final push in Vietnam's struggle.

These resources—money, gold, rice, and occasionally manpower—flowed to Vietnam and Laos via underground networks linking *Viet Kieu* communities across Thailand and Laos, a transnational operation that defied Thai patrols. Logistics units in Laos, staffed by *Viet Kieu* and sympathetic locals, transported goods and personnel across borders. This coordination underscored their organizational

sophistication and determination, rooted in a pro-communist stance that contrasted sharply with Western *Viet Kieu*'s anti-communist exile narrative. Unlike their counterparts in the United States, who opposed Hanoi post-1975, the Thai *Viet Kieu* embraced Vietnam's cause, driven by Thailand's discrimination—raids, beatings, jail—and Vietnam's call for solidarity, reinforced by a historical anti-colonial legacy in Thailand where Phan Boi Chau had sown revolutionary seeds (Goscha, 1999).

The "incompatibility management" perspective, with its six strategies, provides a robust framework to analyze how the *Viet Kieu* navigated this tension; they are the following: 1) elimination of one or more parties; 2) imposition of one party's position; 3) a legal approach seeking legal entitlement; 4) narrowing the gap between positions; 5) closing the gap entirely; and (6) maneuvering around incompatibilities while avoiding direct clashes and awaiting their dissolution. Strategies 1) and 2)—elimination or imposition—were unfeasible for the *Viet Kieu*, a marginalized diaspora lacking the power to eliminate Thai authorities or impose their pro-communist stance against a militarized regime backed by the United States. Strategy (3), a legal approach, was equally impractical; no legal mechanisms like the ICJ existed to adjudicate their support for Vietnam, and Thailand's Internal Security Act criminalized their actions, offering no recourse. Strategies 4) and 5)—narrowing or closing the gap—were also inviable during this period, as the ideological divide (communism vs. anti-communism) and geopolitical stakes (Cold War proxy conflicts) precluded compromise or alignment between the *Viet Kieu*'s revolutionary goals and Thailand's anti-communist policies.

Instead, the *Viet Kieu* adopted strategy 6), "maneuvering around," as their primary approach, pursuing their objectives indirectly while avoiding direct clashes with Thai authorities and waiting for potential dissolutions of incompatibilities over time. This strategy manifested in clandestine operations orchestrated by secret associations linking Udon Thani to other northeastern hubs. They organized resource campaigns, such as "Golden Week," the "Jar of Rice for Feeding Soldiers," and the "Flower Blossoming Campaign," to mask their intent. Cultural subterfuge, such as the "Fatherland Altar," disguised political symbols as religious artifacts, leveraging Thai reverence for Buddhism to deter searches. Resources flowed via transnational networks through Laos, with logistics units evading Thai patrols, demonstrating their ability to circumvent Thailand's restrictions without direct confrontation.

This maneuvering-around strategy proved effective in multiple dimensions. First, it preserved community cohesion under intense surveillance—weekly raids and arrests failed to dismantle their networks, as secrecy and cultural disguises shielded core activities. Second, it provided substantial support for Vietnam—gold, rice, and funds bolstered Ho Chi Minh's forces, contributing to victories such as Saigon's fall in 1975—without triggering a full-scale Thai crackdown that could have eliminated their presence (strategy 1 imposed by Thailand). Third, it minimized escalation; by avoiding open defiance, reprisals remained sporadic—e.g. five executions in 1968—rather than systematic, as seen in later deportations (50 in 1985). Mr. Quang (pseudonym), a 72-year-old trader, reflected, "We couldn't win against Thailand's guns or laws, so we went around them—quietly, carefully. It kept us here and Vietnam alive."

The strategy's success hinged on patience, awaiting shifts like Vietnam's 1975 victory and eventual regional reconciliation in the 1990s, which dissolved incompatibilities over time. Rooted in long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1991), this approach balanced survival in Thailand with loyalty to Vietnam, showcasing resilience amid structural constraints—such as curfews, martial law, and fines of 500 THB for speaking Vietnamese—while leveraging regional ties through Laos to sustain their efforts.

The 1990s Onward: *Viet Kieu* as Development Contributors

The *Viet Kieu*'s situation remained precarious after Vietnam's 1975 victory, as regional instability—particularly Vietnam-Thailand tensions over Cambodia—kept them under scrutiny through the 1980s. The 1990s marked a transformative shift, driven by a confluence of regional and national changes that dissolved earlier incompatibilities. Vietnam's Doi Moi reforms (1986) opened its economy to foreign investment, and its withdrawal from Cambodia (1989) eased regional tensions. Moreover, becoming an ASEAN member in 1995 signaled a commitment between Vietnam and Thailand for cooperation. Concurrently, Thailand, under Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan (1988-1991), adopted a forward-looking policy to transform Indochina "from a battlefield into a marketplace," prioritizing economic ties (Sajjapala, 2018). The policy promoting economic cooperation created a channel for Thailand and Vietnam to foster and strengthen the relations. As a result, since 1995, the two countries have managed to reach agreements on important issues, including those related to Vietnamese migrants in Thailand. Under the administration of Prime Minister Anand Punyarachun, the second-generation Vietnamese were granted Thai citizenship instead of being sent back to Vietnam (Sajapala, 2018), enabling a transition to peacebuilding and development roles that reshaped their identity and contributions.

This shift in the *Viet Kieu*'s role as a development contributor is reflected in the replacement of clandestine networks with public associations, which became central to community-state engagement—a stark departure from the secrecy of earlier decades. Having been established in the 2000s, the Vietnamese-Thai Association, with branches like Udon Thani's and the BAOTV, emerged as key platforms, renting or building public offices in Udon Thani's urban center. These bodies facilitated cultural, social, and economic activities that bridged Thailand and Vietnam, leveraging the *Viet Kieu*'s newfound citizenship—conferring voting rights, property ownership, and freedom of movement—to act openly. Mr. Phuc (pseudonym), a 62-year-old association president, noted, "Citizenship gave us a voice. Before, we whispered in shadows; now we speak in public, organize festivals, meet officials. It's like waking up after a long sleep."

Economically, the *Viet Kieu* became vital conduits for trade between Thailand and Vietnam, capitalizing on their linguistic fluency, cultural familiarity, and regional networks. By 2023, Udon Thani's steel product market was dominated by *Viet Kieu* firms. Beyond steel, *Viet Kieu*'s other types of businesses, such as restaurants, food manufacturing, jewelery, and condominium construction are also blossoming in the locality. These ventures partially boost local economies (Phan, 2016). Furthermore, the BAOTV participated in development projects planned by Udon Thani's government agencies, such as establishing the "World Heritage Triangle" tourism route, which comprises Ban Chieng (Udon Thani), Luang Prabang (Laos), and Ha Long Bay (Quang Ninh, Vietnam). Culturally, the *Viet Kieu* revitalized their heritage while fostering bilateral goodwill. The community's participation in the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Historical Site, nowadays as an attractive tourist destination in Udon Thani, could be considered as a milestone marking the *Viet Kieu's* role switching from peace-wreckers to peace-builders in the eyes of the host state. On a national and transnational scales, this implies a significant improvement in Thailand-Vietnam relations. On a local scale, the "joined hands" in site construction gave the Viet Kieu marked credit for their contributions to the process of normalizing and further developing relations between their host and home countries.

In parallel, as a peacebuilding contributor, the Vietnamese in Udon Thani are involved in organizational tasks with the Vietnamese Embassy or Consulate in Thailand for visits of Vietnamese state's

leaders to Udon Thani. The community's members communicate with the local government to schedule meetings for both sides and serve as Thai-Vietnamese interpreters during the meetings. Mr. Quang, a retired trader, proudly shared that, as his Vietnamese competence is excellent, he was invited by the community's association to serve as an interpreter for at least two meetings between Vietnamese state leaders and Udon Thani government officials. Moreover, the community acts as an economic mediator. Mr. Thai reflected that BAOTV held Vietnamese commodity exhibitions in Udon Thani from 2019 to 2020, with the participation of *Viet Kieu* entrepreneurs in Thailand, as well as entrepreneurs from Vietnam and Thailand, along with high-ranking officers from the Consulate General of Vietnam in Khon Kaen province, Thailand, and officials from the Udon Thani provincial government. This contributed to the introduction of products from each country to the other and, to a considerable extent, facilitated trade between the *Viet Kieu* and Vietnam. In addition, BAOTV representatives, by attending meetings with other overseas Vietnamese business organizations in Vietnam, successfully connected with overseas Vietnamese in Laos to gather information on the service of transporting goods from Udon Thani to Vietnam. BAOTV then provides this information for its members who need to utilize such transportation services. In this way, the Vietnamese-Thais help to sustain their fellows' livelihood in the locality and partially, promote transnational flows of goods between Thailand and Vietnam.

This peacebuilding role aligned with Thailand and Vietnam's mutual interests—economic growth and regional stability—enabled by citizenship and reconciliation. Unlike the Tamil diaspora's conflict funding or the Somali diaspora's militia support, the *Viet Kieu* shifted from war to development, reflecting Brinkerhoff's (2011) view of diasporas as peace agents when conditions allow. Their contributions—trade networks, cultural hubs, and diplomatic bridges—mirrored the Bosnian diaspora's post-war aid efforts but were uniquely public, leveraging Thailand's acceptance and Vietnam's openness, a stark contrast to their earlier covert resistance.

"Ceasefire capitalism" frames the shift, positing economic integration as a peace mechanism in post-conflict settings, where former adversaries—here, Thailand and Vietnam—pivot from hostility to mutual profit. For the *Viet Kieu*, this manifested in their role as economic conduits after citizenship unlocked freedoms of movement, property ownership, and trade. Ceasefire capitalism served as a peace mechanism by aligning the *Viet Kieu*'s economic activities with those of Thailand and Vietnam, sharing the goals of stability and growth, and replacing Cold War enmity with ASEAN-driven cooperation. This shift aligns with Brinkerhoff's (2011) view of diasporas as peace agents when conditions are favorable, with citizenship and reconciliation facilitating a public, profit-driven role distinct from their earlier, more covert efforts.

Viet Kieu and Their Flexible Roles in Conflict and Post-conflict Peacebuilding Periods

Viet Kieu's trajectory—from conflict supporters in the 1950s-1970s to peacebuilders post-1990s—demonstrates remarkable flexibility, driven by agency and contextual shifts. During the conflict phase, they navigated Thailand's anti-communist repression through clandestine networks, sending rice, gold, and money to Vietnam via Laos, using altars and communal campaigns like "Flower Blossoming" to mask intent. This reflected incompatibility management—adapting to Thai hostility while aiding Vietnam's wars—rooted in long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1991) and a pro-communist identity tied to Ho Chi Minh's legacy, distinct from the Western *Viet Kieu*'s anti-communism. Their transnationalism (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998) relied on secrecy and regional ties, with Laos as a conduit, sustaining Vietnam's struggle despite risks.

Post-1990s, citizenship and Thailand-Vietnam reconciliation—Doi Moi, ASEAN entry—enabled a public role. Associations like the Vietnamese-Thai and BAOTV replace shadow networks, fostering trade, culture, and, to some extent, diplomacy. Captured by the concept of ceasefire capitalism, this shift from opposition to collaboration echoed the Acholi diaspora's peace talks but was amplified by the legal status, which granted freedoms absent in earlier decades. Their multiple embeddedness—local (Udon Thani), national (Thai-Vietnamese policies), and transnational (Laos-Vietnam links)—facilitated this adaptability, aligning with Horst et al.'s (2010) multi-scalar lens.

Theoretically, this relationship challenges static diaspora categorizations, showing roles as contingent on context—Cold War enmity versus post-Cold War harmony. The agency persisted across phases, covertly resisting Thai surveillance and then openly building bridges, reflecting resilience amid structural constraints (e.g. 1970s curfews) and opportunities (e.g. 1990s trade policies). This case enriches diaspora studies, offering a model for communities like the Cuban diaspora—shifting from militancy to support—where history, policy, and networks shape peace-conflict dynamics.

Conclusion

The Vietnamese diaspora in Udon Thani province, Thailand, exemplifies the multifaceted and evolving roles that diasporas can play in shaping peace and conflict dynamics between their host and home countries. This study has shed light on how the *Viet Kieu* transitioned from clandestine supporters of Vietnam's liberation struggles during the 1950s-1970s to key contributors to peacebuilding and bilateral development from the 1990s onward. Their journey reflects a remarkable adaptability, driven by agency within shifting historical, political, and social contexts. It offers valuable insights into the broader theoretical understanding of diaspora roles in transnational relations.

During the conflict phase of the 1950s-1970s, the *Viet Kieu* in Udon Thani navigated Thailand's anti-communist repression with ingenuity and resilience. Facing travel restrictions, cultural suppression, and intense surveillance, they established clandestine networks to support Vietnam's wars of independence. Through strategies such as the "Fatherland Altar," which disguised political symbols as religious artifacts, and resource campaigns like the "Golden Week" and "Flower Blossoming Campaign," they channeled substantial aid to Vietnam via Laos. This period, analyzed through the "incompatibility management" framework, highlights their use of "maneuvering around" strategies to pursue their pro-communist goals without directly confronting Thai authorities. Their actions, rooted in long-distance nationalism and a historical alignment with Vietnam's revolutionary cause, underscore their role as active participants in the diaspora-conflict nexus, contrasting sharply with the anti-communist stance of *Viet Kieu* in Western contexts.

The post-1990s era marked a profound shift, catalyzed by Vietnam's Doi Moi reforms, its withdrawal from Cambodia, and ASEAN integration, alongside Thailand's economic outreach and the granting of citizenship. This reconciliation dissolved earlier incompatibilities, enabling the community to emerge as public actors in peacebuilding. Replacing secret networks with formal associations like the Vietnamese-Thai Association and BAOTV, they fostered economic ties and cultural exchange. The "ceasefire capitalism" framework captures this transition, framing their economic integration as a mechanism for sustaining peace between former adversaries. By aligning their efforts with Thailand and

Vietnam's mutual interests in stability and growth, the *Viet Kieu* transformed from marginalized outsiders to stakeholders in a reconciled regional order.

This dual trajectory—conflict support followed by peacebuilding—demonstrates the *Viet Kieu*'s flexibility, a quality shaped by their multiple embeddedness in local, national, and transnational spheres. Their agency persisted across both phases, whether covertly resisting Thai surveillance or openly leveraging citizenship to strengthen bilateral ties. These findings challenge static categorizations of diasporas as solely disruptors or harmonizers, revealing their roles as contingent on context, from Cold War tensions to post-Cold War cooperation. The *Viet Kieu*'s experience in Udon Thani thus enriches diaspora studies, offering a nuanced model applicable to other communities navigating similar host-home dynamics, such as the Cuban or Tamil diasporas. By foregrounding their political agency and contextual responsiveness, this study underscores the *Viet Kieu*'s enduring impact on peace and conflict processes, contributing to a deeper understanding of transnationalism and diaspora potential worldwide.

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Appendix

List of Interviewees

1. An, female, 72 years old, retired market seller, *Viet Kieu* teacher, and member of Vietnamese-Thai Association's Executive Board.
2. Bang, male, 58 years old, owner of a steel-made-products company, *Viet Kieu* member.
3. Duong, female, 70 years old, retired market seller, *Viet Kieu* member.
4. Hoa, female, 70 years old, retired marker seller, *Viet Kieu* member.
5. Huy, male, 72 years old, retired food producer, former head of Ho Chi Minh Historical Site's executive board.
6. Kien, male, 72 years old, owner of steel-made-product company, member of BAOTV's advisory board.
7. Phuc, male, owner of steel-product selling showrooms, 62 years old, president of Vietnamese-Thai Association, and representative of *Viet Kieu* in Thailand in the Vietnam Fatherland Front Committee.
8. Quang, male, 72 years old, retired trader, *Viet Kieu* teacher, and secretary of Vietnamese-Thai Association's executive board.
9. Quang Anh, male, 58 years old, owner of a steel-made-product company, *Viet Kieu* member.
10. Thai, male, 62 years old, restaurant owner, president of BAOTV.
11. Thao, female, 70 years old, retired market seller, *Viet Kieu* teacher.
12. Thy, female, 72 years old, restaurant owner, *Viet Kieu* teacher.
13. Van, female, 72 years old, tailor, *Viet Kieu* teacher.
14. Viet, male, 65 years old, retired market seller, *Viet Kieu* member.
15. Xuan, female, 70 years old, retired market seller, *Viet Kieu* member.