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Place, Memory, and Identity in the Vietnamese Diaspora

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August, 1996

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University
This work is my own unless otherwise stated.

[Signature]

Mandy Thomas
Abstract

This thesis traces the twin themes of place and memory in the lives of a displaced people who experience life in Australia through the life left behind. This study begins with the notion that identity is spatially encoded, and that the modes of defining the self are physically and metaphorically grounded in space. The ongoing relationship with Vietnam connects people through time and space with a mythologised place that lies within the landscape of memory but has existential immediacy. I examine the degrees of separation from the symbolic landscape of Vietnam that are invoked in the reconstruction of identity that occurs after migration.

The significance of the spatial dimension of migration has been explored in several different domains. I begin by providing a background to the displacement process through a historical account of the transformations in Vietnamese national identity, and the events that led to mass migration out of the country. Through the personal accounts of these processes by Vietnamese people, I detail the response to the arrival of Vietnamese people by Australian society, and the changes within the Vietnamese communities over the last twenty years. I then examine the construction of Vietnamese spaces within Australia beginning with the embodied differences of Vietnamese-Australians, leading out through domestic spaces, and streetscapes to the use of public spaces. I reveal the way in which both fragmentation and consolidation of family ties are experienced spatially. I explore the spaces in which the body moves as well as the spaces of Vietnamese homes to draw out the explicit and implicit meanings encoded in domestic landscapes and the material arrangements of social space. Relationships between different Vietnamese families and communities are also examined in spatial terms as is the relationship of Vietnamese communities to the broader Australian society.

The relationship that Vietnamese people have with Vietnam is examined through people’s memories as well as through their ongoing relations with their homeland and with family and friends elsewhere in the diaspora. By studying the changes in the relationship that Vietnamese people have with their homeland I explore the geopolitical landscape that invests the lives of Vietnamese-Australians with the past, in another time and space. Borderlands are formed within the broader Australian community as well as in relation to an imaginary past and present homeland. The creativity of diasporas in constantly changing circumstances is tempered by the will
to create immutable borders on both sides of a cultural divide. The chimera of boundaries is revealed through the highlighting of diversity and transformation in individual people’s lives, in relationships within and beyond families, and in the Australian urban environment.

By tracing the power and potency of ‘home’ and the memories of other times and places in the lives of Vietnamese migrants in Australia, some of the threads in the complex weaving of identity in the lives of Vietnamese Australians are revealed. The capturing of the past in the present is explored, particularly in relation to places that have been lived in in the past, and spaces in urban Australia which Vietnamese people now inhabit. Constructions of the past are unravelled through a study of memories, fantasies, narratives and myths. The hidden dimensions of marginality are examined through a study of the spatial politics of difference within urban Australia, within the overarching historical and political contexts of Vietnamese migration. The identities of Vietnamese people have been infused with new meanings as people’s lives undergo transformation within the changing environmental and cultural worlds of Australia where they are impacted upon by the expectations and responses of mainstream society. The spatial configurations of Vietnamese-Australian identities are explored in order to understand the possibilities for both freedom and subjection offered by a new country and to evaluate the multiple meanings of home.
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Map 1. Vietnam
Map 2. Sydney
(Local Government Areas)
Points of departure

This century is marked by massive movements of people around the globe, people who have been exiled, people who have been forced out of their homelands, and people who, for a multitude of different reasons, have made their homes elsewhere. A home left behind is never completely forgotten or abandoned as elements of the past continue to be remembered and experienced in new lands, in times and places far away. This thesis is about those linkages with the past and how displacement affects people’s notion of home.

Since the Second World War the social fabric of Australia has been significantly transformed by migrants. My childhood was spent for the most part in western Sydney. It was there that I experienced the rapid and dramatic changes in the landscape of Australian life that was provoked by the arrival of people from other places. From my child’s eyes, most migrants appeared superficially to have a relatively smooth transition to their new country. This rosy view of their situation was due mainly to deafness and myopia on the part of mainstream society to the voices and the bodies of the displaced. Cracks in this vision soon became manifestly obvious and certain questions began to plague me – what does it mean to one’s sense of self to be habituated into another culture and yet to live one’s life separated from it? In the attempt to survive in a new country, what is forgotten and what is remembered of the past? As time passes how is difference perceived by the self and by others? And, finally, what does ‘home’ mean to someone in exile? These questions I carried with me through time and I turned to them again when choosing a research topic, realising that understanding the experience of migrants forms the basis of an understanding of contemporary Australian life.

In an attempt to grapple with the question of the consequences of displacement on the creation of new identities I have examined the relationship between exiled communities and those at home; representations of Vietnamese identity to the diaspora itself and to the dominant culture; changing relationships of power in the diaspora; and the effect of displacement on notions of 'home'. There have been

1 ‘Diaspora’ is a term understood here to mean a global formation of people, related by symbolic or real ties, temporally and spatially to a ‘homeland’ (Ang, 1993:35).
numerous studies of migrants based upon census data, structured interviews and surveys but, for the most part, these have focussed upon issues of employment, education, residential concentration and health status. Recent surveys have also included studies of the dilemmas of homelessness (Ethnic Youth Issues Network, 1990) and the problems of aged migrants (Thomas and Balnaves, 1993). There is as yet little research on Vietnamese refugees that sheds much light on how macro political, social, and economic conditions not only trespass into, but also construct the life experiences of migrants.

The way that the historical and social context of a person's departure from Vietnam may structure social ties and social status are in turn clearly linked to different perceptions of Vietnamese identities. Some studies have examined the relationship between new migrants and established residents but so far few, if any, have unravelled the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland of both memory and contemporary reality. In spite of the passage of millions of people from country to country in the post-war period, the continuing interaction between the diaspora and the homeland and the effect of diaspora cultural life on popular culture in the homeland have been absent from most studies of ethnic minority groups (see comments by Bottomley [1992:4]). When I began this research, my prime intent was to examine Vietnamese identity in terms of the dynamic between 'home' and 'away'; between Vietnamese in Australia and in Vietnam. But during the course of fieldwork, questions about 'home' became more central to my endeavours as I came to realise that identity is spatially encoded.

**Place and identity**

This study deals with the processes involved in the continuing negotiations over ethnic identity of the Vietnamese in Australia in relation to the memory of place and space. The identity of Vietnamese people encompasses seeking some resolution to the contrasting systems of meaning and radically different historical narratives that they find in Vietnam and Australia. Identity, or the process of engagement of the self in the social world, is an issue for migrants partly because representations of migrants often contain the assumption that identity is somehow homogeneous, coherent and stable. Migration, however, highlights the relational, contextual and fluid nature of identity. As I see it cultural identities, representations, and space, are
locked into an inseparable knot primarily because identity is related to the representation of the self, and definitions of the self are grounded in space. I have chosen to think of 'identity' as a construction, an enactment, which Stuart Hall suggests 'is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within and not outside representation' (Hall, 1990:222). In this way the diaspora experience is not something given and final but is contingent and contextual. Diaspora identities, rather than being situated in a place of the past or molded into a utopian future, are enmeshed in the constraints and the opportunities of the present. At the same time these identities unravel historical chronicles and images of the future. This study is thus organised around the notion of the construction of Vietnamese identities, rather than upon a timeless, fixed and rigid ethnic category.

During the course of fieldwork I came to realise that when examining the Vietnamese diaspora, identity must be conceived within the locus of power relations that Vietnamese people operate within, both at a local and global level. As Hall (1989b:70) argues, 'Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, [identities] are subject to the continual interplay of history, culture and power'. In an attempt to uncover the nature of Vietnamese identities, it is therefore important to examine the realm of politics as well as the social and historical factors at work in their production. I have examined the methods through which the state, its policies on immigration and multiculturalism, its institutions and agencies as well as the media and popular discourses surrounding migrant identities, have all been incorporated into Vietnamese definitions of themselves.

Numerous complex and often contradictory representations of Vietnamese people actively contest the domain of identity. Notions of an authentic Vietnamese culture and identity among Vietnamese-Australians are linked historically to notions of national identity, to ethnic purity and to an idealised past. Notions of what it is to be Vietnamese are also entangled with non-Vietnamese discourses on the American Vietnam War, on migrants, on Asians and on class differences within Australian society. These ethnic identities, often perceived to be given and natural, are created identities and are constantly shifting. There is an interplay across national boundaries as identity is influenced both by the past and by contemporary global political and economic inequalities. The creation of boundaries and separations, both real and metaphoric, has occurred in several spheres: in the lives of individuals, in relationship to past lives in Vietnam, within Vietnamese families,
within Vietnamese communities in Australia, within Australian society, and beyond in relation to contemporary Vietnam.

This thesis is also an attempt to understand the nature of boundaries, both material and social, that lay within the spaces of Australian cities, and the lives of Vietnamese in relation to their homeland, to their personal histories, and to the wider Australian society. The plurality of spatial practice does not however deny the existence of some common threads of Vietnamese migrant experience. Some of the ideas presented here also attempt to contribute to explicating the plurality of experience and search for an understanding of the processes of divergence from prescribed norms that occurs after displacement. Focussing on general trends has the problem of homogenising the enormous differences and range of experiences of the Vietnam-born, so I have attempted to give diversity some of its flavour at the same time as making claims about trends in the shifting conditions of migrant peoples.

Although migration is historically a common phenomenon, the latter part of this century has been characterised by an explosion in the number of refugees. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees in 1996 put the present number of refugees worldwide at 27 million, and increase from 17 million in 1991 (UNHCR). Until very recently social scientists have been, for the most part, inattentive to the phenomenon of large-scale cultural displacement. Identity and ethnicity have assumed an increasing importance in studies of cultural systems. They have only recently been emphasised because they appear to be unravelling an increasing complexity. This development has occurred because of the assumption that they were definable, coherent and unchanging, an assumption which has been radically displaced by the experience of chaos that has arisen from massive global displacement. One of the consequences of being uprooted is the creation of transnational identities, identities which cross and incorporate several worlds. To develop a feel for the complex nature of Vietnamese migrant identities I will outline various threads in its production.

Since before the Vietnam War ended there has been a continuous scholarly interest in Vietnam. However, since doi moi, the Vietnamese government’s policy of
economic renovation and reform, was introduced in 1986 there has been an efflorescence of academic studies. Soon after the end of the war there were many accounts of the hardships of the boatpeople in leaving Vietnam and in adjusting to life in new countries. Soon, however, the focus of research on refugees was upon their welfare needs after resettlement. As Turpin (1985) has noted, most of this work was driven by the need to address what were seen as the problems in the settlement of Vietnamese people in large numbers in cities in the United States, Canada and Australia. The issues of unemployment, the need for welfare and English classes were examined along with explorations into the psychological adjustment of refugees. Governments tried to determine how to develop policies related to refugee resettlement and their concern to address the adjustment of refugees to the wider society motivated much of the research. Academic interest is also linked to the wider debates on immigration and multiculturalism as attempts were made to reduce what was considered the ‘burden’ of a large refugee intake (ibid). Generally speaking, in Australia, the recent literature on the Indo-Chinese settlement processes have concentrated on specific ‘problem’ areas primarily related to psychological and socio-economic adjustment of refugees as well as on issues of integration (see Library Bibliography Series, 1990; Turpin, 1985:25; Coughlan, 1989). Further, the implications of mass migration on the slippery issues of identity and ethnicity, on the social production of place, and on the spaces of people’s everyday lives, have been, for the most part, only recently been examined by social scientists.

Space and Migration

While ethnicities are often associated with particular territories and attachments to land, when a people migrate little has been understood about the way that the fracturing of connections is dealt with, and may persist. At the same time, Yaeger (1996;16) has pointed out that this severing of connection often highlight ‘the hybrid nature of all localities’. The construction of identity after migration has an important spatial dimension because migrants are always in some sense ‘out of place’, and because migrants almost always attempt to create a sense of being at home in the new place. The emplacement of migrants within a complex urban

2The policies of doi moi are outlined in Forbes et al, 1991.
structure which incorporates race and class-based differences complicates the picture of the spatiality of migrant experience at the same time as pointing to its centrality. As Foucault says,

'I think it is somewhat arbitrary to try to dissociate the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves. If they are separated, they become impossible to understand. Each can only be understood through the other.' (Foucault (1984:246), quoted in Pred, 1990:4).

Rarely, however, is there an examination of the 'relocation' of a migrant people into the new landscape and the interpenetration of the marginalising practices of the dominant culture into the experience of migrants in that landscape.

Sibley has argued persuasively that the way that spaces are linked to each other 'may be illuminated by moving between the home, the locality and the nation rather than treating each spatial configuration as a discrete problem' (1995:90). This study is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the production of place and space of Vietnamese Australians but is an attempt to highlight the social and geographical conditions of their experiences in Australia by moving between the different realms of social space. Likewise, while endeavouring to understand some of the central features of the continuing relationship to homeland, I do not assert that this is a thorough examination of localities in the memory of Vietnamese people. Further, although I have shown some of the diversity in individuals lives and experiences I cannot claim to have represented the plurality of Vietnamese voices, but rather, hinted at the rich subtlety and variety of Vietnamese people's life courses, preoccupations and understandings. This project has endeavoured to unwind the relationship that identity has with both the metaphoric and the geographic position and emplacement of Vietnamese in Australia, and their relationship to Vietnam. However, it is not a claim for the determining nature of place, or a claim that identity is wholly spatially-based. Rather, I have attempted to outline not only some of the ways that places become embroiled in definitions of the self, but also how spaces both incorporate and constitute politics, economics and social relations.

Space is central to studies of all human societies as it is in space that we are tied into the life-world both of the present and the past. As Yaeger (1996:13) argues, 

'...space remains one of the last great "frontiers". After demystifying religion, economics, consciousness, and language, after refuting the
naturalisation of the body and the suppositions of the natural sciences, after unmasking the norms of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality, where can we turn but to space itself, to that named and unnameable anchor that seems to moor both nations and bodies in place?'

Space is a crucial analytical theme for examining the experiences of migrants because of their connections and disconnections to several worlds at the one moment. The inseparability of the spatial from the social has been recently analytically examined by a large number of theorists working in different disciplines in the volumes Keith and Pile (eds) (1993), Gregory (1993), Watson and Gibson (eds) (1995), Hirsch and O’Hanlon (eds) (1995), Soja (1989), Sibley (1996), Carter, Donald and Squires (eds) (1993), and Yaeger (ed) (1996). Throughout this study I will draw on these texts along with the important earlier works of Heidegger (1962), Lefebvre (1991; 19963), Foucault (1984;1986), de Certeau (1988[1984]) and Bachelard (1969[1958]).

How this study was undertaken

The research for this thesis was conducted along a number of different tacks. I conducted fieldwork in both Sydney and Canberra over several different periods beginning in mid 1992 through to the beginning of 1995. Twelve months of this work involved direct involvement with Vietnamese people, most of whom live in western Sydney. I began by talking with families I already knew, and gradually met more people by visiting community centres, English classes, restaurants and schools, and by attending festivals and celebrations. As well as visiting Vietnamese people in their homes I went to weddings, outings and community events with individuals, groups or families.

Perceptions of the past and the character of the displaced person’s notions of home can be vividly produced in textual form. This is because personal histories may be constituted through reminiscence, fantasy, narrative and myth. It is for this reason that I spent additional time researching newspaper reports in national dailies, local newspapers and Vietnamese language newspapers, reading Vietnamese biographies, memoirs, and literature, and viewing film relating to the experience of

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3 This volume is a translated collection of Lefebvre’s writings on cities which spanned the period from 1930s to the early 1990s.
being Vietnamese in Australia. An important source of material was the Journal of Vietnamese Studies, an Australian journal in English which attempts to provide information on Vietnamese history and tradition as well as being a forum for studies of overseas settlement, for a readership that includes both overseas Vietnamese and members of the wider Australian community. Many of the journal articles provide vivid glimpses of the re-creation of ‘tradition’ that is apparent in the context of Vietnamese experience in the present.

In Sydney there are four weekly Vietnamese newspapers as well as many other publications from community organisations and SBS broadcasts daily in Vietnamese on radio. The large market for Vietnamese videos, most made in Australia, is also a fertile area for investigation. As has been frequently noted, these public manifestations of shared meanings provide a tangible route through which ‘imagined communities’ can represent themselves (Anderson, 1983: 30).

I also spent a total of three months in Vietnam, interviewing relatives of Vietnamese-Australians whom I already knew in Australia, and examining spatiality in everyday life. Fieldwork in Vietnam was conducted in late 1993 in Hanoi, and in late 1995 in all three regions of Vietnam. All those people mentioned in this text have been given pseudonyms, as I promised to protect the identities of all those who shared their lives with me. Sometimes certain distinguishing features of individuals are also fictitious, such as their occupations, so that they will not be recognised. Conversations were conducted in either English or Vietnamese, or a mixture of both. Initially, when my Vietnamese was rather poor, people present would translate for me. When conversations were not recorded I would write down people’s comments. Because of the mixture of Vietnamese and English that was used, I have attempted to render most of the comments of informants in understandable English, where necessary, as I did not wish syntactical errors to impinge on the meaning of what was said. Where this was done I checked my translations with informants to ensure accuracy.

It was important to be aware of the nature of the lives of Vietnamese-Australians as always in a process of movement and I have attempted to reflect not only the diversity of experience in different lives, but also the rapidly changing form of the relationships and experiences of city dwellers. As the work has unfolded, this study has revealed the co-existence of a divergence of views of history, social
relations, migration and the homeland, that are held by different individuals. The plurality of spatial practice does not however deny the existence of some common threads of Vietnamese migrant experience. Some of the ideas presented here also attempt to explicate the plurality of experience, a search for an understanding of the processes of divergence from prescribed norms that occurs after displacement.

This study required several different methodologies and research targets. It was important to begin with a general exposure to the lives of Vietnamese people in Australia, to meet as many people as possible and to obtain a sense of the diversity in the differing shapes of people’s stories. So as well as speaking to many individuals from different kinds of Vietnamese families I have also spoken to street gang members, to very old Vietnamese men and women, to schoolchildren, to monks and priests, and to members of the Vietnamese Community Organisation. This meant familiarising myself with the vast range of experiences of everyday life for many different people in the Vietnamese communities. In order to examine the politics of identity I conducted research by not only talking with Vietnamese people but also being a participant in community activities such as festivals, performances and commemorative occasions where the visual representation of Vietnamese cultural identity is on display. In an effort to speak to as many Vietnamese people as possible interviews were carried out randomly, sometimes on street corners, sometimes in restaurants, on trains, at festivals, or in the taxis of Vietnamese drivers. A lot of interactions that I had with Vietnamese people were informal discussions that took place at gatherings in people’s houses or shops. Understanding community life was the crucial starting point for engaging in research about the diaspora experience in the context of everyday situations.

This is not an ethnography of the entirety of a Vietnamese community or Vietnamese communities as that would not be possible because of the size and nature of the Vietnamese population in Australia. Rather, it is a study both of the experiences and the perceptions of home of a small group of people born in Vietnam and now living in Australia in relation to the wider social and political environment in which they live. It is because the complexities of the communities of over 40,000 Vietnamese in Sydney could not be captured in a single ethnography that my research was confined to just a small number of people, those who are from Hanoi. While continuing to meet and interview other Vietnamese people I also narrowed intense study to eight families. These families were chosen
because they all had originated in Hanoi, all at different times and stages in history, and so encompass a variety of different age groups. They exhibited a range of migration experiences and through the examination of memory and place, they all allowed me to see the connections that one place, Hanoi, had in the imagination of different people.

The choice of informants from an urban northern origin is by no means meant to represent the entirety of Vietnamese people’s experience, as Vietnam has profound regional differences, and is primarily rural. It does, however, reveal the richness of experience of a single city. Many people left Hanoi in 1954, and four of the families I interviewed were in that group of people, although all had very different experiences when they came to Saigon\(^4\) at that time, and then to Australia after 1975. Apart from these families, two individuals came by themselves directly from Hanoi; one of Chinese ancestry, and one a dissident and recent political refugee. Another family came via Haiphong to Hong Kong, and the last family lives in Hanoi but the adult couple were students in Australia for four years and returned to live in Hanoi in early 1996. Although most Vietnamese in Australia came directly from the south of Vietnam to Australia, nearly half the ethnic Vietnamese were born in the north of the country or have parents born in the north. This has meant that a significant number of Vietnamese have experienced two occasions when they were refugees. There are quite a few northern families including ethnic Chinese who live closely together within the larger Vietnamese community and who appear to have a type of sub-community of their own.

There were many reasons for choosing Hanoi in particular, as part of the fieldwork for this research. Hanoi is a city of translocations and continuous displacements, of colonisation, conquest and war. It is a home to Chinese, Laotian, Cambodian and those from the ethnic minorities of northern Vietnam, as well as, historically, to colonists. It is also presently the temporary home of many Westerners including business people, government advisers and development workers. Because I wished to examine the history of displacement I hoped that by capturing the passages of many lives through and in such a city I could indicate how the history of migration and displacement is deeply intertwined with urban life in Vietnam. The assumption

\(^4\)Although Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh) after 1975, I refer to it as Saigon because this is done so by most Vietnamese living in Australia.
that lives are only displaced once people come to the West is a misconception. Hanoi is a place where many assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated.

How much a preoccupation of movement and migration is a part of Vietnamese life, or what it has become is, I believe, essential for understanding Vietnamese communities in Australia. How much the aspects of the diaspora experience can be attributed to experience prior to resettlement is clearly an important question. Diaspora identities constantly produce and reproduce themselves anew through the interaction with the wider society as well as through ongoing social change, but cannot be viewed without any regard for the past experience in the homeland. Although dealing primarily with people associated with Hanoi, I also explored how themes of displacement related to the wider Vietnamese community. There is a lot of movement of Vietnamese people between cities and so some of the families I got to know well moved to or from Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane, or to or from the United States, Canada and France.

My thesis is an attempt to grasp the webs of belonging to place among Vietnamese refugees, and to show how these are part of the ongoing negotiations over identity. I have had to strike a balance between data on the community at large and the individuals within it. I have had to cast my net wide, catching history, international politics, census data, urban planning and the life of the 'city' together with the people's lived experience. From these points of departure came my own journey to attempt to understand meanings of home, and the meanings of a homeland that are transported by a displaced people into another country.
Outline of chapters

The thesis is divided into eleven chapters that move through three themes, from the symbolic space of home, to the marginalisation of Vietnamese migrants in urban environments, and finally to a study of nostalgia for the homeland. I begin by giving the historical context for the contemporary experiences of Vietnamese people in Australia through an exploration of Vietnamese colonial and contemporary history with particular attention paid to the events that led to a massive exodus of refugees from Vietnam after 1975. I have also traced the history of Vietnamese migration to Australia, Australia’s changing relationships to migrants through policies on immigration and multiculturalism, and the structural position of Vietnamese in Australia.

The first chapter, The embodiment of difference, explores the way that bodies are marked as being associated with another place, for both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese people, and the means through which the body has particular salience when attempting to understand Vietnamese identity in Australia. The way that Vietnamese people use their bodies in space, and are positioned physically and metaphorically in relation to both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese people communicates social meaning. I explore the way in which the bodies of Vietnamese migrants are simultaneously object and agent. This will indicate how the relations between migrants and the wider society is felt and sensed through their bodies. The everyday bodily experiences of Vietnamese people in Australia as they move about within the world reveals much about the nature of these wider relations. By examining the dynamic between how Vietnamese bodies are represented and how they are experienced, it is evident that the body is a predominant marker of difference from both within and without. I will indicate how the dominant media construction of Vietnamese bodies as defiled has sustained forms of exclusion and distancing which have influenced the way that Vietnamese bodies are lived. This separation can be used to challenge marginality, but very often reinforces the difference and subordination experienced by Vietnamese people.

Chapter Two, Virtual home, is an examination of the houses, homes and personal spaces of Vietnamese people. Social beings engage with the world through time and space. Because we are embodied, social beings are always ‘somewhere’ but there are enormously complex ways in which our physical
location in time and space is tied to other moments and places. For Vietnamese-Australians, home is a concept interlinked with a homeland, a language and a social world, all incorporated into the experience of loss. They may experience the here and the now in part through the past in another country, Vietnam. Social space is embedded in a consciousness of space that may be both metaphoric and physical. By showing how the experience of other times and spaces have become enmeshed with the everyday experience of Vietnamese people living in Australian cities it will be revealed that a home’s place in the world may have resonances with spaces in the imagination. I will also indicate the manner in which recollections from past spaces may imbue the houses of Vietnamese-Australians with links and attachments to people and places elsewhere.

Chapter Three, Relationships in space, begins by examining the way in which the dispersal of families and generational discontinuities are often couched in spatial terms. I explore the relationships between family members who have been separated through migration and show how these spatially distant relations are constituted. The ideal of several generations living under one roof has been re-evaluated by many Vietnamese families who have migrated. These changes occurring in Vietnamese family life in Australia may break the strong connection people make between the home and the family which exists in Vietnam. I thus inquire into the manner in which family relationships are scripted in locations, highlighting the way in which transformations in social life are also spatialised. In the case of Vietnamese migrants, not only is the relationship to one’s parents the formative site of fission and union, but so is the relationship to Vietnam itself, to which ‘the Vietnamese family’ is intimately linked. This chapter also explores the process of intense bargaining over power between young and old that is presently taking place in the Vietnamese communities in Australia as families attempt to deal with different cultural values and expectations. This is viewed in the wider context of history and the pressures of the broader Australian society upon Vietnamese-Australian families.

The following four chapters examine people’s perceptions of the urban landscape in western Sydney and explore the nature of urban space in the lives of Vietnamese-Australians. In order to understand the complex set of restrictions and liberations presented by urban space, Chapter Four, Urban space and difference, evaluates the way in which the Vietnamese experiences of spatial relations are
related to the ongoing contestation over Vietnamese migrant identities. Media and popular perceptions associate Vietnamese people with the formation of ghettos. This representation of Vietnamese communities reflects the physical and social worlds in which Vietnamese people interact with others. The interactions between the state and Vietnamese-Australians is analysed in numerous dimensions, within immigration and settlement policy as well as in housing and local planning.

By examining the constant reformulations of social and physical landscapes, Chapter Five, *Estrangement in the city*, reveals the way in which Vietnamese-Australians create and represent their place in Australia, and how they live in, and imagine, space. The transformation in the terrain of space that has occurred in our cities through migration has highlighted the complexity of the organisation and nature of space and posed challenges to established views of spatial praxis. I trace how their engagement within urban space affects the ways that Vietnamese people in Australia live in and experience the world.

In an attempt to investigate where Vietnamese-Australians ‘dwell’ in the Australian consciousness, Chapter Six, *In the margins*, reveals how Vietnamese are represented spatially in the media, and how, in urban spatial structure, the dangerous and disruptive influences of Vietnamese in the spaces they inhabit are the paramount representation. An examination of the changes Vietnamese, and other ethnic groups, have effected upon the ‘Australian suburb’, is important for what it reveals about the nature of suburban race relations. In spite of the wide range of class backgrounds, Vietnamese by their very presence have transformed western Sydney; workplaces, schools and streetscapes. I will explain how the creation of boundaries arises from both sides, how it is both a decision on the part of the Vietnamese themselves in a challenge to outside domination, but how it also is a response to difference on the part of the wider society.

Chapter Seven, *Status and place*, explores the processes through which there has been an increasing social and economic differentiation among Vietnamese-Australians since the first arrivals in 1975. It has become clear that among the Vietnam-born, there is a persistent pattern of accelerating socioeconomic diversity, along with important class, status and ethnic differentiation. The social mobility of Vietnamese in Australia is also manifested in spatial terms, with people moving into different areas of cities that are not defined as Vietnamese. I will here examine the
process by which people differentiate themselves socially, and how one can observe the spatial ramifications of such a shift of status.

Chapter Eight, Touring places and spaces, is an examination of several forms of movement between places and the way that these travels unravel spatial meaning. Here I analyse some of the spatial references that are enmeshed in the lives of Vietnamese-Australians. Vietnamese people themselves engage in international travel primarily to Vietnam, but also frequently travel to visit relatives and friends in other parts of the diaspora, particularly the United States and France. The other important forms of tourism relating to Vietnamese spaces are the trips taken by non-Vietnamese to Vietnam and to the Vietnamese areas of our largest cities, the most popular site being Cabramatta. This chapter also explores the effects of globalisation upon the creation of transnational identities.

Chapter Nine, Tet: a critical tale of diaspora life, examines the most important ceremony of the year, Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. Events like the Tet celebration appear to crystallise many of the preoccupations of Vietnamese people in Sydney. The public and private Tets have been examined here in terms of the public display of Vietnamese identity to Vietnamese people themselves and the private desire to 'belong' and to feel comfort with others who share the same cultural meanings. This section will expose the connections and differences between the expressions of Vietnamese identity at the opening ceremony of Tet celebrations in Western Sydney in January 1995 and the private Tet celebrations in family homes. I will indicate the way in which, through Tet and the organisation of other festivals and ceremonies, the Vietnamese can find solutions to the problem of defining themselves as different. At the same time Tet presents the community organisations with an effective means of communicating political and cultural meanings to Vietnamese and of representing the Vietnamese to mainstream society.

Chapter Ten, Living with legends, examines the use of myth in the framing of Vietnamese womanhood. I indicate that Vietnamese women frequently uphold images of a normative Vietnamese womanhood from their former lives in Vietnam, at the same time as attempting to subvert their position of subordination within the family and in their wider social relationships. I will also show that by maintaining a continuous engagement with, and mirroring of, the legendary exploits of Vietnamese female heroes, diasporic women maintain what they perceive to be the
‘strength’ of Vietnamese womanhood. The female power evoked in Vietnamese myth and history masks and preserves women’s inferior status within the family and wider society by depicting the real strength of women as the ability to act selflessly within familial relationships and to endure loss and hardship silently. Ideologies of Vietnamese womanhood tie women in the diaspora to historical imagery and to their homeland, as well as providing them with a position of separation and distancing from mainstream Australian society.

Chapter Eleven is entitled Crossing over: the relationship between overseas Vietnamese and the homeland. I first examine the different visions Vietnamese in Australia and Vietnam have of each other and then indicate the ways in which the exchange of resources, both material and human, between the two groups, reveal strategies for status differentiation. Although there is marked variability in approaches to the creation of this difference, the wish to be defined differently from each other is invoked in multiple threads of the ongoing relationship between the two groups. The profound influence of overseas Vietnamese on contemporary events in Vietnam cannot be underestimated. It is because of this that I have explored the theme of the relationship between the insiders and the outsiders when referring to the differential status of Vietnamese inside Vietnam and those who have left. At the same time I indicate that the nature of these transnational formations of people created by ongoing movements around the globe defy simple categorisation.

After the conclusion to this work, I include an appendix. The purpose of this appendix is to provide socio-economic and demographic information on Vietnam-born people who are settled in Australia. I have analysed data available from the 1991 census in order to provide a background to the claims I am making in the thesis regarding the relationship of Vietnamese to mainstream Australian society. Although there are some problems in using data from the census, I have found the information useful in placing my fieldwork in the wider perspective of an examination of the structural position of Vietnamese people in Australia. The demographic data has also been helpful in analysing social trends in the diaspora communities.

The following section contextualises the presence of Vietnamese in Australia with an overview of the history of their journeyings.
Context

Stories of preparations for escape from Vietnam, the many foiled escape attempts, the escape itself, life in refugee camps, and, finally arrival in Australia, all are crucial moments in the accounts of life's journey given by Vietnamese people, whether presented verbally, artistically, or in written form. These stories often are central moments of transformation and change in the shape of people's lives. The following account is indicative of the way in which these stories are often framed in certain ways for others.

One evening I was eating with a Vietnamese-Australian family in their home. The three children were quietly eating their meal while their mother spoke to me about her escape from Vietnam. She spoke of her first attempted escape, when, as often happened, the police captured the entire boatload of people before they had even set out to sea. She told me how she was imprisoned for six weeks, and how lucky she was that her detention was only six weeks as some people had returned to their families only after years of imprisonment. Suddenly the woman's eight year old daughter looked up at her mother with a shocked and anxious expression, her eyes dark and uncomprehending. *Mum, were you in prison? Tell me, were you really sent to jail?* And in a flash her mother replied, *No, of course Mum was not in prison, its just one of those stories we tell of Vietnam, you know how we are always telling those stories.* The child immediately relaxed and continued eating. When I later asked her mother why she had covered up the truth, the woman told me that her daughter thought prison was for bad people, and that she would not have been able to understand imprisonment for a political crime. However, it appeared to me that even the escape itself was kept hidden from the child. It was as if the child's sense of groundedness in the world would wither by just knowing that her mother had been in such danger, that her mother had lived in an in-between world, a transitional state, and had experienced a very real homelessness of being that she could not bring herself to expose to her child. It seemed also that the child's mother did not want to be always reminded of that time in her life, that she did not wanted to be pressed too much by an inquisitive child, that she feared that perhaps the child might make her dwell too much on her own loss of situatedness at that time, and make her remember what is still 'unthinkable'.
This moment revealed to me the way in which the past in Vietnam could be constructed for others. In the process of meeting many Vietnamese people, I found what is common in oral history, that some stories are sanitised or made to appear as half-truths, as legends, or as mythological history, and that other stories are emphasised and dramatised, changing in every retelling. Some events dominate memories of Vietnam and are recalled with emotion and vivid detail.

This study tells the stories of many people, of their past, of the present, and of the ambiguous and ill-defined area that overlaps both the present and history. Before exploring the nature of these stories, it will be first necessary to examine their historical and political context. I will begin by touching upon some major themes in Vietnamese history. Then I will outline the origin of Vietnamese in Australia and the political and social context of their arrival in Australia. And, finally, I provide a brief overview of the settlement of Vietnamese people in Australia and a general introduction to Vietnamese diasporic communities.

**Historical connections**

I will firstly examine the history of notions of a Vietnamese national identity. At various times this century, Vietnamese history and national culture have been presented to the Vietnamese public differently for political reasons. Thaveeporn Vasavakul (1995), in her study of social studies textbooks in Vietnam between 1945 and 1965, has argued that the writing of the past presented views of history that served different agendas. While the north and the south divided history into epochs using different criterion, they both tended to emphasise the nationalist spirit and the history of resistance in the development of the nation. Most of the Vietnamese people I have met in Australia were either educated in Vietnam in the period Vasavakul mentions, or are the children of those educated in this period. This explains, in part, why the leitmotifs of nationalism and resistance are frequently repeated by these people when discussing Vietnamese history. The recalled history of Vietnam shrouds the origins of the Vietnamese people in legend. Even though the name of ‘Vietnam’ and the combining of diverse populations under a unified structure only occurred in the early nineteenth century, the last two
thousand years in the history of Vietnam is viewed by most Vietnamese as a pattern of themes that continually resurface: resistance to, and struggle against both China and the West at the same time as absorbing outside cultural and political influences, internal competitions over power and consensus, a claim on the border regions between Vietnam and its smaller neighbours, a desire to exert influence in the region, and the rejection of western political intervention. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that over their history, Vietnamese people have been able simultaneously to transform social and political life by incorporating foreign influences, but still to resist foreign control and to maintain their own sense of continuity and uniqueness as Vietnamese (Taylor, 1983; Woodside, 1976; Marr, 1971; 1996). In this century Vietnam has been continually subjected to the influence of outside powers through invasion, colonisation, military occupation, communist bloc intervention, international development agency programs and international business interests. These influences have originated from a variety of foreign powers, both of the East and the West. Presently the impact of tourism and business in Vietnam has brought renewed efforts to maintain tradition and repel foreign influences (examples are given in Marr, 1996:38-9).

Vietnam’s geography has placed it beneath a giant and powerful neighbour China, with which a fraught relationship has been maintained over at least two thousand years. It is impossible to understand Vietnamese nationalism without comprehending the ambivalence that has marked Vietnam’s various dispositions towards China (Mackerras, 1988: 13). In the 2nd Century BC the Chinese began settling in the Red River Delta (today’s northern region of Vietnam). The Chinese attempted to impose aspects of their political and cultural system upon the Vietnamese, who, in spite of resistance efforts, were governed by the Chinese throughout the long-lasting Han dynasty. The Vietnamese revolts against the Chinese (such as the Rebellion of the Trung Sisters) during this period have entered Vietnamese legend (see Chapter Ten). The Chinese continued to rule for over 1000 years but were always regarded as foreign invaders. Even after the overthrow of the Chinese armies in 938AD, China still maintained sovereignty over an independent Vietnam, exercising enormous influence over the language, and political, religious and social life of the country. It had been during the millennium of Chinese rule that Buddhism was introduced and became a major social force. It was only in the late Le Dynasty (1428-1524) that many Chinese cultural imports were discarded. Nevertheless, Vietnam had so strongly integrated Chinese values and
ideas into its cultural and political life, that it was not possible to completely separate itself from Chinese influences.

Although Vietnam’s first intense contact with Europe came when the Portuguese arrived to trade and to missionise in the 1500s, it was not until the nineteenth century that Vietnam became the focus of more vigorous colonial efforts. From 1847, for four decades, the French intensified their colonisation of Indochina using increasing amounts of military force until 1887 when Vietnam’s three regions were placed under French colonial rule. Resistance to the French was a persistent feature of the colonial period which was marked by continuous nationalist rebellions (Marr, 1971). The growing nationalist sentiment intensified the political movement to throw off the yoke of colonialism. Continuous uprisings eventually led Ho Chi Minh to declare the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 although the French tried to reassert their control. Finally, in 1954, after an enormous resistance effort on the part of the Vietnamese, the French were overthrown. Negotiations over the outcome of the conflict led to the Geneva Accords which divided the country between north and south and provided that general elections be held in 1956 with the aim of reunifying the country. However, these elections were never held as the newly appointed leader in the south, Diem, who was backed by the United States, rejected any suggestion of unifying the country. When Diem began persecuting Buddhists and increased his reliance on the United States, a resistance movement to his leadership began in the south and this later involved the northern communists. The United States became more and more involved in the events in Vietnam and eventually sent their first combat troops there in 1965. The brutal war which followed was an expression of global political divisions, and touched upon the lives of every Vietnamese person in both the north and the south of the country. Memories of the war will never be forgotten by many overseas Vietnamese people. But the most potent memories are often reserved for the time in the early 1970s after American troops were withdrawn and, finally, in 1975, when Communist forces marched into Saigon. The war was over at last, but for most people living in the south at the time, it was the beginning of a shocking transformation in their society.

A question that has continued to plague the self-interrogation by the United States of its involvement in Vietnam has been how, in spite of extraordinary military and economic resources, it lost to a small, poverty-stricken country like Vietnam. There
are many reasons but, as Mackerras notes, ‘one word sums up the most important of them – nationalism’ (1988:29). A revolutionary nationalism developed through both the period of Chinese control and the colonial period, reaching a pinnacle after the Second World War. National unity became a catch cry of the revolutionaries who attempted to aggregate and mobilise ethnic, regional and religious differences in the nationalist endeavour. The concept of an independent Vietnamese nation-state encompassed both indigenous and western notions and became a powerful motivating force for revolution. Post-colonial movements, as Anderson (1983) has noted, galvanise the desire for self-determination and political unity. In the production of notions of a Vietnamese national and unified identity, nationalist ideology has frequently been invoked over ethnic identification because of the nationalist overriding concern for the unity provided by the territorial boundedness and a shared history.

It is when examining the nature of identity in the Vietnamese community in Australia that the history of Vietnamese national identity is a major issue. It was a surprise to me to find that Vietnam’s greatest cultural heroes are not infrequently mentioned in the everyday discourse of Vietnamese in Australia. These heroes have been inscribed on Vietnamese street and place names, and the narratives of their defense of Vietnamese sovereignty and their extension of Vietnamese territorial claims have been canonised in Vietnamese history books. As Woodside (1976) has argued, Vietnamese people are profoundly conscious of the activities of these semi-mythic heroes, their country’s history and literature, and the continuous struggles for national independence. The ability to reject outside influences is upheld as an ideal for many Vietnamese in Australia. How Vietnamese here feel about their homeland is thus crucial for understanding how they maintain what they believe to be central Vietnamese cultural values. One of the most fundamental values is the resistance of the nation of Vietnam to outside influences. Many Vietnamese in Australia feel communism is a foreign and destructive influence on Vietnam. As will become clear during this thesis, in Australia the struggle against communism in their homeland has frequently fused Vietnamese of disparate religious, regional and class backgrounds into a political and unified force.
The Origin of Vietnamese Refugees

In 1975 three major events in Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) propelled thousands to leave in a mass exodus across both land and sea. All three states were rocked by sudden and profound changes in government and society but by far the largest number of people who fled originated from Vietnam. In mid-April in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge had entered the capital and claimed power. On April 30th the north and south of Vietnam were reunified after the northern armies entered Saigon, the southern capital. Later in the year, a new regime seized power in Laos and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic was proclaimed. The change in political leadership and ideology led to a dramatic change in fortune for many who had held power prior to 1975. Throughout Indochina many who had supported the previous governments were now attempting to flee, fearful of the consequences of their political allegiances. Initially those who departed were people who had worked with the former regimes, but later a broader section of the population followed, ranging from educated urban elite to farmers and ethnic minorities, also fled the country. Despite the enormous personal cost, both materially and psychologically, of departing, and the danger of the journeys taken by sea or land, people continued to flee their countries in larger and larger numbers in subsequent years.

When the northerners claimed power in Vietnam in 1975, the populace had endured 30 years of war in which a large number of Vietnamese people died or suffered family separations, destruction of their homes, displacement and social upheaval. From the end of the Second World War, political instability in Vietnam had meant that many families had been relocated, displaced or had been compelled to become refugees. Following the Geneva Agreement of 1954, which divided the north and south of the country, almost a million people moved from the north to the south. Most of these were of the Catholic minority. Some also moved from Cambodia or Thailand to southern Vietnam. Within South Vietnam millions of people were uprooted by the war, and moved to the cities. In an attempt to separate insurgents from the rural population, the strategic hamlet program was devised by the South Vietnamese Government and its allies. This plan, which relocated people from their native hamlets, uprooted a huge number of villagers. Many villagers strongly opposed their removal from their ancestral lands to live in large patrolled compounds. However, their pleas went unheard and over two thirds of the
southern rural population were forced to leave their villages (Young, 1991:83). So the experience of displacement and of being uprooted from one’s home became intolerably frequent for many Vietnamese. Although many had been refugees in their own country, few had fled beyond the boundaries of Vietnam prior to 1975. This completely changed with the transfer of power in the south and the subsequent reunification of the country. Massive social chaos and uncertainty ensued and the outflow of people soon followed.

In the final days of April 1975, as the communist forces finally captured Saigon, almost all the Americans fled. Although people had expected the communist arrival, many were unprepared for the rapidity of the takeover. The Americans made some provision for the departure of those who had worked closely with them, but many had to be left behind in the last days. In the final scramble to leave many people wishing to escape were left behind. However, at least 135,000 Vietnamese managed to accompany the Americans and were rapidly moved to the United States after a transit of some time in Guam. Almost all those Vietnamese who departed in April or soon after, were southern elite and had either worked directly with the Americans or were in positions of authority in the military, government or business (Frieze, 1986:5).

Although the first days after the communist takeover were marked by confusion, the new regime did not immediately impose many changes. Many southerners were relieved that the war was finally over and were willing to reserve judgement on the new government. Although a large number of people continued their usual activities, others were secretly preparing their escape. Within a few months, more dramatic changes were made and some people began to experience hardship and persecution. The prime targets of the government’s ‘re-education’ campaigns were those who had worked in the former southern government, in business and in the military. A large number of these people were detained in jail and then later sent to re-education camps in remote areas of the country. Conditions were harsh and prisoners were forced to undergo long hours of political indoctrination. It was often several years before prisoners were released and they frequently had no contact with their families. Members of the families of these political detainees often lost their jobs and homes. Within a few years those who were declared political enemies widened to include those more peripheral to the southern government such as students and the ethnic Chinese.
Long before the war ended Vietnam had faced economic difficulties because the primarily rural economy was unable to be sustained in wartime. After the war ended Vietnam became an international pariah, apart from its conditional acceptance by the communist bloc. The massive social and political change in the south, the cost of rebuilding roads and railways and reconstructing the war damage, and an inability to depend on foreign western aid, meant that Vietnam confronted a severe economic crisis. No reparations were forwarded by the United States and Vietnam began to increasingly depend on assistance from the Soviet Union. Inefficiency and social upheaval also led to food shortages and poor production levels. Prior to 1975 the war had led the northern population to focus their industries upon their war effort, so their level of production and standard of living had declined. However, after reunification, rather than improve, the situation in the north worsened. The southern standard of living also dramatically declined. In the south many of those who had supported the former government were exiled to the harsh environments of the New Economic Zones, which never became highly productive farming land as had been expected by the government. In spite of increasing poverty and economic decline, most refugees claim that it was the lack of freedom of speech and movement, religious oppression and political persecution rather than material scarcity and harsh living conditions that motivated their decision to escape (for example, see Rivett, 1988).

Refugees began to leave in 1975 and relatively small numbers continued to leave in 1976 and 1977. By far the bulk of people left by boat, often in small, unsafe vessels. Most people arranged the boat journey with middlemen who paid fishermen to part with their boats. Many people were caught and sent back, often being imprisoned as a result. Others lost all their money to unscrupulous dealers. The journeys on these overcrowded boats were extremely dangerous and many lost their lives at sea, by drowning, starvation, or murder by pirates. In spite of the dangers, the number of people escaping increased, particularly after 1979 when the Vietnamese government began to persecute the Chinese minority and nationalise their businesses. It also appears that the communist government began to realise the benefits in actively allowing people to escape. Regional officials were paid handsomely to turn a blind eye to the ‘secret’ departures, and those who escaped had their houses and assets handed over to the government. The regime also encouraged the exit of those who might in future defy their policies (see Kelly,
The worsening economic climate and the continuing political persecution led to an increasing exodus out of the country. The increase from 5,247 departures for the whole of 1976 to a record of 21,505 for one month only, in November 1978, was also boosted by the use of larger vessels (ibid). More than a million persons are estimated to have escaped from Vietnam since April 1975 with more than 40,000 still remaining in refugee camps in Hong Kong and South-East Asia. Those still waiting in camps are slowly being repatriated back to Vietnam after pressure was exerted upon Vietnam to accept them.

When examining the series of displacements that Vietnamese in Australia have experienced it is important to take account of the long months or years spent detained as stateless outsiders in refugee camps. Almost all Vietnamese in Australia who came here as refugees recall the endless interviews, forms and the seemingly limitless waiting required for them to be granted refugee status and a country of resettlement. In departing Vietnam and seeking out host countries, Vietnamese people in South-East Asian camps became defined as refugees (Hitchcox, 1990). The redefinitions of identity experienced by Vietnamese people in camps were the result of both an active desire to speed up resettlement as well as a bureaucratic necessity on the part of those countries accepting refugees. Because of the pressure to conform to requirements of particular countries' refugee policies, the controlling institutions of refugee camps, such as international and religious organisations, were often persuasive in modifying values and attitudes of the detainees (ibid: 183-4). For example, a significant number of Vietnamese in camps converted to Christianity either in Vietnam prior to their departure, or in the refugee camps. The inducement for conversion to Christianity was, for some, the notion that this might assist their application for refugee status, particularly to Western ‘Christian’ countries. Christian belief may also have been seen as a legitimate protest and sign of differentiation against communism as religious freedom was being suppressed under the Hanoi regime. The idea of salvation in Christian traditions may also have been appealing to those who had struggled to leave (ibid).

The impact of the camp experience on refugees’ identity is highlighted in the cultural orientation programmes which, along with English instruction, all camp participants were forced to attend. Most people remember being lectured on the importance of health and hygiene in the West, and on privacy, on domestic violence, and on corruption and bribery. This reconstituted them as unhealthy,
corrupt, violent and invading of privacy. The construction of American and Australian values were clearly set against a view of Vietnamese that was stereotyped and racist and which undoubtedly affected Vietnamese desire to invert this representation of themselves on resettlement.

Identity in a multicultural Australia

From the arrivals of the Europeans in Australia through to the present, Australia, being continually reconstituted by migrants, has always dwelt upon the nature of 'ethnicity', and the effects of the interrelations between different ethnic groups (Pittman, 1993:29). Historically, the questions of immigration and interracial relations have been evident in government policy as well as in public debates surrounding these issues. During the postwar period alone we have experienced a whole spectrum shift of attitudes in Australia's policies towards immigration and cultural life. From the white Australia policy, through the assimilationist approach, to multiculturalism, for migrants from non-English speaking countries and for those who were not 'white', we have passed from a period of absence, to one of shame and now to the celebration of difference. The nationalist endeavour often acts to homogenise cultural differences by its focus upon the ideal citizen and the national 'type'. The claim of a particular ethnicity may therefore be a powerful corrective to the normative national self, acting to support the principle of diversity over uniformity (see McCall, Burnley, & Encel, 1985:10). However, the value of multiculturalism is now also being hotly debated after accusations that it leads to the pigeonholing and stereotyping of ethnic groups. Critics of multiculturalism have also argued that, by defining how much ethnic differentiation is permitted, it has the effect of controlling not only the cultural expression, but also the political expression of migrants (Jayasuriya, 1991). Ethnic diversity can become a reason for mainstream self-congratulation at their own benevolence in accepting others into the country. This celebratory reaction may gloss over inequalities between different groups and perpetuate paternalistic thinking. The state's concerns to classify and define citizens for its own purposes (for example, in census statistics) frequently leads to further stereotyping rather than an understanding of the extent of diversity across the nation. These bureaucratic mechanisms, such as the developing relationship between ethnic leaders and state organisations, although allowing
spokespeople to voice their concerns and interests, often lead to a reinforcement of particular definitions of ethnicity and a standardisation of ethnic difference (McCall et al: ibid).

From the Second World War to 1975 the Australian government was showing an increasing involvement in Asia, especially with the Colombo Plan, an aid program designed to give a university education to people from developing countries. At the close of the Vietnam War in 1975 there were few Vietnamese living in Australia. Of approximately 1,000 individuals, 537 were Vietnamese orphans adopted by Australian families, 335 were Colombo Plan students and approximately 130 were studying privately (Coughlan, 1989a:14). There was also an unknown number of Vietnamese nationals who had married Australians working in Vietnam as members of the military or government, and who returned with their spouses to live in Australia.

The end of the war in April 1975 coincided with a liberalisation of Australia’s immigration policy towards Asian-born people as well as a greater involvement with the Asian region. The international focus upon the sufferings of the ‘boat people’ focused attention upon Australia’s policies towards the settlement of refugees. While many still feared that a change in immigration policy may encourage an influx of people from Asia, international pressure mounted on Australia to provide humanitarian support for refugees and to ease the burden of housing and feeding Indochinese refugees that had been placed upon its northern neighbours. Australia launched a refugee policy in 1978 which aimed at balancing these domestic and international pressures. At the same time, the public’s acceptance of multiculturalism was growing. Vietnamese people had begun to arrive in Australia at the opening of the multicultural phase of cultural policy in Australia and their increasing number coincided with the new refugee policy. In her article ‘The Vietnamese in Australia: new problems in old forms’, Nancy Viviani writes,

‘While we had begun to settle small numbers of Asians through regular migration from 1960, and we had a fairly long standing tradition of settling refugees (particularly the 200,000 Eastern European refugees of the 1950s), this was the first time we had settled a group of people in whom the characteristics of race and politics combined to distinguish them from other migrants and refugees’ (1985:235).
There was another historically important impact of Vietnamese settlement in Australia which was the arrival by boat of some Vietnamese on Australian shores. The effect of this mode of entry into Australia was profound although the number of these refugees was only 2000 in total. Refugee landings on our shores ‘had a far-reaching and complex impact on many Australians’ deeply held perceptions of the vulnerability of their country to Asian penetration’ (Viviani, 1985:235).

Viviani goes on to argue that the attitudes of the Australian population towards accepting Vietnamese refugees were polarised by different attitudes towards the Vietnam War. Those in favour of accepting refugees were those who supported the southern regime and those who believed in accepting refugees for humanitarian reasons (ibid:235). But many who believed that the northern government would be lenient towards its previous enemies, thought that the southerners should not leave and that ‘hysteria about a mythical bloodbath would create a wave of refugees who would be better off in their homeland in the long run’ (ibid:235-6). Domestic political concerns and the perceived similarity between the intake of large numbers of refugees from eastern Europe in the 1950s and the intake of Vietnamese after 1975 made many fear that homeland politics would continue to produce discord in Australia. This fear was also the basis for ‘that pungent descriptive and racist epithet for Vietnamese – Yellow Croats’ (ibid:236). Neither side of government proposed a generous refugee policy but as the number of refugees in Asian camps rose to exceedingly high levels, pressure was brought to bear on Australia and other Western nations to accept a higher number of them for resettlement.

After the arrival of a large number of Indochinese refugees into southeast Asian camps after 1975, many faced new hardships under the difficult and uncomfortable conditions of the camps. Some Vietnamese people decided to face another series of risks by attempting a journey by sea to Australia. Media and public reactions to their arrival were mixed. As Viviani (ibid) outlines, fears of an onslaught of Asians mirrored the panic of invasion from the north of an earlier period. This extreme reaction by the Australian public along with international pressure to relieve the refugee situation in ASEAN countries, led to an increase in refugee intake. The refugee quota increased even further in 1979 as more and more ethnic Chinese in Vietnam escaped to the camps after the deterioration in relations between Vietnam and China.
The arrival of Vietnamese in Australia thus occurred at a crucial moment of political change, signalling both our growing acceptance of our involvement in Asia and our ability to assist in the maintenance of ethnic identification after settlement. Vietnamese settlement in Australia has thus been seen by many to be a test-case for both the policy of accepting a large number of Asian refugees, and for the dream of multicultural harmony. In the wider community, there are conflicting views about the success of our immigration and multicultural policies. The recent focus upon Asia in foreign policy has also been received with mixed opinions. In the following chapters I will reveal how the Vietnamese are often targeted as the cause of social disintegration because they have come to symbolise the postwar policy and attitude shifts in Australian society.

Vietnamese communities

The expression ‘Vietnamese community’ is an ambiguous one. For the Vietnamese in Australia there is not a community in the sense of a homogeneous, well-organised and stable group in what are otherwise diverse and fluid urban areas. There are networks and a notion of connectedness as there is also some degree of spatial concentration in certain geographical locations. Culture and ethnicity have become contested domains within the new social and political categories that have accompanied multicultural policy. The notion of a Vietnamese community to some degree presupposes uniformity, yet there is enormous regional, religious and ethnic diversity in Vietnam. Also, intermarriage with non-Vietnamese in Australia, individual mobility across ethnic boundaries and the shifting politics within these boundaries over time means that categories represented as fixed and immutable are constantly changing. To begin with, when the spatial distribution and concentration of Vietnamese in Australia is examined it appears that there has been a lot of movement out of the areas of high spatial concentration which were originally centred around migrant hostels (Coughlan, 1989). Whether Vietnamese people see themselves as part of a community is another issue entirely. The notion of ‘community’ is frequently invoked in the discourse on ethnicity. The claims of belonging to a community is often a moment of empowerment and marks the desire of many to be heard. It is also part of ‘a struggle to come into representation’, and reflects concern to identify the experience of marginalisation as something shared
with others (Hall, 1988:27-31). There is clearly a blurred boundary to the notion of community, and people may be ambiguously placed to it, as will become clearer in the following pages. In spite of the difficulty of applying the term ‘community’, there remain areas in Sydney where there are a high number of Vietnamese people living and working. It is one of these suburbs, Cabramatta, in western Sydney, in which I spent most of my time (see Map 2).

To anyone who has been in Cabramatta, it seems extraordinary that in 1975 there were only 900 Vietnamese in the whole of Australia. Today, twenty years later, there are 180,000. In western Sydney alone there are more than 50,000 Vietnamese people (Census, 1991). Cabramatta has been transformed into a place frequently seen as a showpiece of multiculturalism. The central pedestrian plazas in Cabramatta contain a remarkable number of primarily Vietnamese and Chinese restaurants and stores, selling Asian foods, a considerable number of Vietnamese published materials, Vietnamese music, and videotapes of Vietnamese entertainers. In coffeeshops and restaurants, Vietnamese artworks hang alongside tourist posters of Vietnam. In shops crowded with silks and cottons, the blasts of Vietnamese flute, electronic guitar, or lovesongs make it hard to be heard. In a bookshop and newsagency one can find Sydney Vietnamese newspapers, an array of contemporary Vietnamese emigre novels as well as many of the southern works that were popular prior to 1975. Herbalists prepare their products beside the rooms of Vietnamese and Chinese doctors and dentists who trained in Australia (see Plates 11-13). One can buy just about any food that is seen in south-east Asia; green mangoes, star fruit, sugar cane juice, Vietnamese basil, sugar bananas, dozens of different leafy green vegetables, seaweeds, pork cuts, and fresh fish swimming in basins. Hairdressers, tax agents, pinball parlours, duty free stores, grocers, Vietnamese butchershops and travel agencies all add to the animated streetlife. The stores, restaurants and pavements provide a backdrop for a mosaic of social interactions.

Of all the Asian-born population in Australia, the Vietnam-born group has received an exceptionally high level of attention in the media and public discourse, particularly surrounding the debates on Asian immigration. The strong profile of the Vietnamese population in the broader Australian community is partly due to their relatively high spatial concentration in our largest cities, high unemployment rates and comparatively low levels of English proficiency. There is, however, a danger in
stereotyping the attributes of the Vietnam-born, as a superficial examination of their dominant socio-economic features at a particular moment often reveals them to be disadvantaged in numerous ways. These findings can mask the more complex nature of spatial mobility and status differentiation that will be demonstrated in the following pages. It has become clear that among the Vietnam-born, there is a persistent pattern of accelerating socioeconomic diversity, along with important class, status and ethnic differences (see, for a detailed analysis, Viviani et al, 1993). If one is interested in the transformations over time, defining Vietnamese-Australians solely as being ‘disadvantaged’ is therefore unhelpful.

The Vietnamese population in Australia, due to many factors, is clearly not representative of the population in Vietnam. The particular aspects of their politics, socio-economic status, religion and ethnic background are distinctive. Although primarily ethnic-Vietnamese (Kinh), the Vietnam-born population in Australia incorporate more than 60 different linguistic groups. Many are from the mountainous groups of Vietnam and include the Hmong, Tay, Dao and Giay peoples. Other non-Kinh ethnic groups are the Cham, Khmer, Thai, Lao and different ethno-linguistic minorities from China. It is clear that as well as ethnic diversity, Vietnam has profound regional differences as well as class disparities. Vietnam is thus by no means culturally uniform and homogeneous.

There are numerous religious influences in Vietnam and among Australian Vietnamese. Although more than half practice ancestor worship as an element of their Confucian tradition, it is not unusual to follow another religion at the same time. The houses of many families have an ancestral shrine or altar in a prominent position or erect one for the occasion of Tet or for death anniversaries of family members. Apart from Confucianism, the major religions of Vietnamese-Australians are Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism. Confucianism, Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism are known collectively as tam giao, ‘the three religions’. There are also numerous sects such as Hoa Hao and Cao Dai which combine elements of both eastern and western religious philosophies. New religious movements, each usually focussed upon a charismatic leader, have also arisen within the overseas Vietnamese communities. Interest in astrology and the lunar calendar is very strong and many families purchase Chinese almanacs to determine the most propitious timing for important events in their lives. Palm readers as well as astrologists have a large clientele and many Vietnamese people continue to rely heavily upon their
predictions. Religious commitment is waning among the children of the Vietnam-born population and many are disinterested in following their parents’ religion.

Apart from the ethnic Vietnamese, the largest other ethnic group from Vietnam is the Chinese. 34% of Vietnamese-born people living in Australia claimed Chinese ancestry on the 1986 census. The 1991 census did not ask the ancestry question although from the information available on the language spoken at home, it can be ascertained that approximately the same percentage of Vietnam-born people in Australia have Chinese ancestry today. Prior to 1975, the Chinese in Vietnam for the most part retained their distinctive cultural and linguistic heritage. Many families were involved in trading, and in major Vietnamese cities pursued vigorous business interests. In the south of Vietnam there were Chinese schools and in Saigon, there was a large and bustling Chinatown (Cholon). In Australia the families of most of the ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese left China between 1900 and 1945 and the balance left either earlier, in the 19th century, or else left after the Second World War. None had left in the last 25 years, so they all had been out of China for at least one generation (MSJ Keys Young, 1983:32). The original Chinese migrants to Vietnam left China either for economic reasons, because of famine or as a result of the civil war between the communists and the nationalists (ibid).

There is not a great deal of information available on the degree to which Chinese in Vietnam were subjected to racism before 1979 (Stern, 1992). It is clear, however, that in 1979 the Chinese in Vietnam were placed under enormous pressure to leave because of the escalating tensions between China and Vietnam. These tensions arose from the Cambodian/Vietnamese and Sino/Vietnamese border hostilities that occurred at this time. 30,000 Chinese businesses were nationalised and over 25,000 ethnic Chinese attempted to leave Vietnam, mainly through China (Young, 1991:306). Apparently many Chinese in Vietnam had become so well integrated that they perceived themselves as Vietnamese until this time (David Marr, personal communication). In north Vietnam by the time of the communist victory in 1954, many Chinese had already become incorporated into Vietnamese social, political and military life (Viviani, 1984:32). Discrimination against the Chinese by the Vietnamese Government appears to have intensified, and in some cases forced these people to identify with a Chinese ancestry. In the Vietnamese communities in Sydney I investigated both the nature of identity among Vietnamese Chinese as well as among ethnic Vietnamese. I did not investigate the identity of other ethnic groups.
who were Vietnam-born. Both in the past and presently there has been no need to have community organisations that have a prime focus on Vietnamese identity in Vietnam nor, quite obviously, as desperate a need to maintain Vietnamese identity as there is overseas. How the ethnic Chinese have historically defined themselves in relation to Vietnamese in Vietnam is I believe an important and necessary part of identity formation of these groups in Australia.

Being part of a minority marginalised group in Australia has meant that the Vietnamese in Australia have been forced to encounter cultural subordination to a dominant cultural and historical tradition. Where in Vietnam the ethnic Vietnamese had a proud and confident history of repelling foreigners, in Australia they have experienced cultural liminality as a result of the effects of cultural displacement. The Chinese have some experience at being a minority and before 1975 were aware, for the most part, of being part of a greater overseas Chinese network whereas the ethnic Vietnamese have had to newly convert to being a minority group within Australia. It seems that the Vietnamese have a greater sense of having lost their homeland than ethnic Chinese, who have mostly long been separated from China and never had a strong sense of belonging in Vietnam. This is not to say that overseas Chinese do not identify strongly with China, but, rather, that the Vietnamese and Chinese appear to have differing views of what is constituted by the idea of a ‘homeland’. This difference is clearly intensified by many ethnic Vietnamese who like to distinguish themselves from the Chinese by pride in their recorded Vietnamese history and love of their homeland. Many portray Chinese as being incapable of experiencing the deep sense of loss which ‘true’ Vietnamese are experiencing. Chinese-Vietnamese, more than their ethnic Vietnamese counterparts, are more involved with the worlds of business and trading, carrying on similar activities to those they had participated in in Vietnam.

Although there is a myriad of religious, linguistic, class and cultural differences within the Vietnam-born population, most argue that the experiences and concerns they share as refugees make them a cohesive group (Viviani, 1984). For some, the distinctive component they share with other Vietnamese is their political opposition to communism, however, there remain many who do not so clearly fit into this categorisation. In addition to the differing conceptions of a Vietnamese political identity within Vietnamese communities, the broader Australian political and social life is also incorporated into community politics. This is evident in the extraordinary
efflorescence of Vietnamese community organisations over the past ten years or so. This growth of formal organisations is in many ways an attempt to counter the representations that have been circulated within the hegemonic regimes of the non-Vietnamese world and within the changed political system of the unified Vietnam. It is evident that among ethnic Vietnamese in Australia, a powerful nationalist ideology combined with ongoing opposition to the communist government in Vietnam, have until now assisted in meshing Vietnamese-Australians into a unified force (Viviani, 1984:140). Part of the attraction to nationalist and anti-communist rhetoric has been to resist charges that some Vietnamese are not political refugees, but economic migrants escaping poverty (ibid).

As Woodside (1976:95) has noted, in the past, ‘family’ defined traditional Vietnamese society, economically, politically, and judicially, and therefore the axiom about the centrality of the Vietnamese family is warranted. Although the family is extremely important to Vietnamese in Australia the pervasive influence of community organisations is enormous. To most Vietnamese bureaucratic social welfare is an entirely novel concept. The idea of wanting to help someone in need outside the family is often thought of as suspicious. Soon after 1975, with the growth of the Vietnamese population in Australia, a sense of ‘community’ developed to provide a sense of a shared identity and to compensate for feelings of loss and separation. Notions of ‘community’ have also had to be constructed in Australia as people have become aware of their marginal status within the wider society. Evidence for this comes from a Sydney survey which found in 1980 that over 80% of Vietnamese did not belong to any community organisation but by 1985 a complete reversal of this trend had occurred (Loh, 1988:837). This wish to participate formally in community life indicates not only a desire on the part of individuals to influence community issues but a realignment of political power within Vietnamese social life. As there is a great concern that family values will be eroded and paternal authority is under attack outside Vietnam, the ethnic community organisations are often invoked as the crucible for the reinforcement of an ‘authentic’ Vietnamese identity as well as for political mobilisation. Here, the post-migration political identity of ‘Vietnamese ethnicity’ is used as a political resource. The state plays an crucial role in the politics of ethnicity partly because of the incorporation of ethnic power brokers within the state’s organisations.
Within Vietnamese community organisations, different individuals and groups compete for positions of power, and often aim to represent segments of the Vietnamese community at large. The Vietnamese Community Organisation claims not to have a political intent, but rather aims to pursue welfare and humanitarian goals. However, the organisation is concerned to continue their objections to the Hanoi regime and to human rights abuses in Vietnam. They also vigorously fight for the rights of the 40,000 Vietnamese still in Asian refugee camps. This organisation is the umbrella organisation for all others and organises all the large scale festivals such as the Tet celebrations, Autumn and Moon festivals. The Indochinese Refugees Association, although primarily a welfare body (Armstrong, 1980:54-7) is also concerned with homeland issues. Of the three major groups the Greater Overseas Alliance for the Restoration of Vietnam is the most overtly political body, its main objective being to mobilise opposition to the communist government in Vietnam. This group claims ties to similar organisations throughout the world as well as to a resistance movement in Vietnam. Other important community groups are the Vietnamese Buddhist Associations and the Vietnamese Women’s Associations. Many of the Chinese-Vietnamese, in addition to being members of Vietnamese associations, are organised into communities according to their province of origin and their dialect.

Debates about the choice of community leaders are often heated and individuals must participate in intense competition if they wish to obtain a leadership role (Loh, 1988:837). These organisations are highly political in their representation and reinforcement of structures of power within communities as well as between the communities and the state. The authorised spokespeople are almost always men who can use their political resources, funding or public voice to shore up particular interests in the name of the group. Vietnamese men are thus highly influential in obtaining the power to represent Vietnamese people to the wider Australian society. They have influence because the organisations almost all receive government funding for ‘cultural maintenance programs’ and they lobby intensely for the interests of their group. At the core of these representations is the question of identity. Many different organisations, as well as taking up the basic issues of settlement such as housing, employment and English training, play a major role in representing and defining Vietnamese ‘cultural life’.
Over the last ten years there has been a remarkable growth of Vietnamese community organisations, presently numbering over 50. These organisations have extended their welfare role to include an array of functions. They not only reinforce particular views of so called 'traditional' values, but they also allow individuals who are office-bearers to fill positions of status within their communities. They also have a critical role in lobbying the state on issues that are important to the Vietnamese communities, as well as representing their concerns to the wider society (Loh, 1988:836). A major case study of the representation of immigrants in the media was undertaken in the early 1980s and the results revealed the nature of the relationship between migrants and the state. The most important finding in the study of media coverage of Vietnamese was that those in positions of power, both within the Vietnamese communities and in the wider society, were the ones who dictated the media discussion (White & White, 1983: 131). In 1978 for example, when 25,000 Vietnamese arrived in Australia in the one year, none of the new arrivals were interviewed by the press about their plight, in spite of many having fluency in English. Attention was paid to the power brokers – government officials, welfare agencies and leaders of the Vietnamese community groups rather than to the views of the refugees themselves, who were represented, not as active agents, but as passive victims (ibid). Media representations of Vietnamese people will be examined in Chapter Six.

As well as community organisations, other groups which are seen as non-political but which cannot be so easily separated from the dynamics of power, are also involved in the representation of Vietnamese values. Women’s Associations arose primarily to direct support towards women’s special welfare needs. The first Vietnamese community organisations were dominated by a male leadership which consisted primarily of former military personnel. The role of the women’s organisations has been to provide a forum for the expression of women’s views to the larger community organisations, and in doing so, provides a counter to the dominant male attitudes. However, the virtual exclusion of women from leadership positions in all other community organisations has meant that as well as the development of women’s organisations there has been a concurrent growth of informal social support networks. These networks provide support to women in need but also attempt to resist and undermine male power in most of the formal organisations. The contrast between the formal organisations and the informal networks is thus a gendered one. Research in the United States has indicated that
the Vietnamese women’s groups and networks play an important role in the exchange of social and economic resources among households and in the mediation of disputes between men and women in the family (Kibria, 1990). It seems that Vietnamese ideologies of sexual differentiation are both contested and transformed within the new relations of power that are created in the diaspora experience. However, these new relations of power frequently exclude a large number of different voices, such as those of youth, the aged, and the Vietnamese ethnic minorities, in the articulation of a public Vietnamese identity. It is primarily older men with a particular political stance who appear to control the representations of the group.

The intergenerational transformations that are taking place are also a locus of tension within the community. An examination of the changed perceptions of identity between age groups is thus another important area of investigation. Vietnamese religious and community organisations provide weekend classes for the children of Vietnam-born parents to assist in the maintenance of what they see as traditional Vietnamese language and culture (Loh, 1988:837). Young people learn the history of their parents’ country of birth, to read and write in Vietnamese, to sing Vietnamese songs and to cook Vietnamese food. The images and cultural expressions of Vietnam that are presented in these classes are of the pre-War period. In this setting children rarely hear of contemporary issues in the unified Vietnam and thus are exposed to fragmented images of their parents’ homeland. A striking aspect of some Australian-Vietnamese descriptions of Vietnam is that they describe their homeland as having vanished and as being unrecoverable. For many, the only way to redeem their homeland is through the education of their children about a Vietnam older people knew prior to the communist takeover. The consequences for this understanding is that children are frequently seen as the only hope for a different vision of Vietnam. Even though these claims are often indistinct, the fragmentary perceptions of Vietnam only highlight the fraught nature of ‘place’ in the Vietnamese notion of identity. This is rather apparent in one of the stated goals of many refugees, which is that, in living abroad they can rescue their culture from the damaging effects of the Communist regime of Vietnam where, it is argued, their

5 In the United States, Scott(1989) has reported similar findings. He states that many Indochinese, ‘think of their homeland, not as a fallen country under an alien government, but as one lost, never to be seen again’ (p.97).
traditional values have been under threat (Nguyen, Xuan Thu, 1991:8). This political collective identity has thus embodied participation in a mutual code of exile.

The 30th April every year, the anniversary of the fall of Saigon, is a moment of collective objection to the Hanoi regime, and binds Vietnamese throughout the worldwide diaspora. In Australian cities, many Vietnamese assert their connections to the Vietnam of pre-1975, by flying flags of the former southern regime and singing patriotic songs of that period. The Tet celebrations for the Vietnamese lunar New Year are also the visible site for the display and creation of shared understandings of what it is to be Vietnamese and is another important vortex of representations of social and political preoccupations. The Tet celebration will be discussed at length in Chapter 9.

The dominant culture in Australia confronts the emerging identities and subjectivities of the Vietnamese by participating in the flow of images and representations that exist throughout society (Rutherford, 1990:22). Not only has the state and its policies been implicated in this dynamic interplay of representations, but so too has mainstream society and popular culture. However, the line between the state and the public is a hard one to draw precisely, as many of the interactions that take place between Vietnamese people and non-Vietnamese people occur in a situation where the non-Vietnamese are working in government offices, welfare institutions or are other types of service providers. Here, Vietnamese people are continuously bombarded with the language and discourse of the dominant culture.

The term 'ethnicity' was first introduced into government initiatives during the mid-1970s when, for the first time, Australians were adjusting to the new anti-discriminatory, colour-blind immigration policies and to the idea of a multicultural society. While these changes flowed into many national policies to encourage tolerance and equality, the politics of ethnicity became a prominent feature of state/community relations because diversity was recognised and encouraged for the first time during this period. Funding of language and welfare programs specifically for migrants was a major government initiative along with provisions for the development of community cultural activities. For the first time ethnic workers were employed, and community organisations financially resourced, in order to bridge the gap between the state and the ethnic communities. A major innovation was the
introduction of the telephone interpreter service in 1973 and ethnic community radio in 1975, the year that Vietnamese began arriving in Australia.

One of the predominant arguments against multiculturalism has been that by promoting difference conflict will arise, the fear being that cultural diversity threatens social cohesion. This questioning of the rights of ethnic minorities is focussed on the rights of the majority dominant culture, who are seen as victims. As Ghassan Hage has commented, the recent discourse ‘either passively mourns or actively calls for resistance against what it perceives as a state-sanctioned assault on Australo-Britishness as a cultural formation’ (1994:41). Early multicultural policy constituted culture in defined ways (Kahn, 1991). The emphasis on ethnicity as coded in language failed to take into account religious, sexual and political difference. Focussing to a large degree upon language policy narrowed the often broad and unbounded ideological constructions of culture. The state sanctioned production of ‘culture’ also means that the all encompassing nature of state intervention is the route through which cultures are valued and commodified. The bureaucratisation of ‘ethnicity’ has not only led to the commodification of cultures, but has emphasised the differences between them. In effect, different minorities are imagined to be in cultural enclaves, all separate and distinct and set apart from the mainstream.

The ongoing constitution of Vietnamese identities in Australia frequently serves as a critique of perceived mainstream Australian values and a reaction against state definitions of culture. These identities also acknowledge the popular views of a loss of spirituality and moral decay that has occurred in western capitalist societies. Thus many Vietnamese assert as Vietnamese values spirituality against materialism, hard work against laziness, sharing against individualism, extended kin against selfishness and the centrality of the family against the focus upon individual independence. Here, Vietnamese identity involves the conscious selection of particular cultural codes for identity maintenance and rejection of those that no

6Likewise, multiculturalism along with Aboriginality, are often called upon to fill the perceived ‘void’ of Australian identity. Thus, the ‘lack’ of an Australian identity is compensated by the diversity and difference of others. Lattas (1991) has persuasively argued that the notion of an empty Australian identity is clearly unsustainable, but, nevertheless, this fiction continues to be maintained by some writers in popular discourse who turn to indigenous spirituality and art as well as to ethnic diversity to claim a unique Australian cultural life.
longer have meaning or value. In the initial interviews that I conducted in 1993, 'family' was the most mentioned concept when people explained what they felt it was to be Vietnamese in Australia. Next to the family the next most important issue mentioned was the ability of Vietnamese people to be hardworking and industrious. These constructions indicate that in this process of emphasising the difference between Australian and Vietnamese values, a Vietnamese identity speaks in opposition to the dominant culture. It is thus a discourse that acts in resistance to the dominance of mainstream society, and is part of the ongoing reaction to the history of colonialism, and to subordination at every level in society (see Pettman, 1992). In the process of reification, possible crossover points and similarities between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese are buried, and re-created as separate, uniform and bounded groups.

This introduction has examined the historical basis and the context of Vietnamese settlement in Australia. The following chapter enters into the spaces of Vietnamese lives, both in Australia and in Vietnam.
Chapter One

The embodiment of difference

On one occasion I was walking through the commercial centre of Cabramatta, I saw an old Vietnamese woman in a squatting position on one of the seats provided in the pedestrian plaza. She was wearing a conical hat (non la), and black cotton pants and shirt. It is not unusual to see older Vietnamese women just like this woman in Cabramatta, and people generally did not pay much attention to such women. However, on this occasion, something startling occurred. A young woman came up to the older woman and started shouting angrily at her in Vietnamese, You are shaming us. We are not in Vietnam now. Don’t squat down here! The old woman shouted back, You should remember your roots. This exchange indicates much about the way in which the relations between migrants and the wider society is not only thought about by migrants but is felt and sensed through their bodies. The everyday bodily experiences of Vietnamese people in Australia as they move about within the world reveals much about the nature of these wider relations. In this chapter I will explore the way in which the bodies of Vietnamese migrants are simultaneously object and agent, how they are experienced and how they are represented by the wider society.

Marginality and the body

As Merleau-Ponty argues, the body is the origin of all our spatial relationships (1962: 102, 142). The way people inhabit and occupy space is thus directly related to the manner in which they experience their bodies. Luan, a migrant counsellor at a community centre in western Sydney, told me that he always feels somewhat inadequate when dealing with his non-Vietnamese peers, and that this was partly due to his size,

I get on well with my co-workers, but somehow I never feel totally right. It’s because they don’t have the same respect for people that I knew in Vietnam. But also, somehow they feel our opinion doesn’t count, we are smaller, we don’t dominate conversations, that’s how we

Plate 1 shows a different Vietnamese woman seated on a Cabramatta bench.
Plate 1. Vietnamese woman on a bench in Freedom Plaza, Cabramatta

Plate 2. People drinking tea, pavement, Hanoi
were educated as children, always listening, never push your own ideas. So, you see, it’s hard to be heard.

All social encounters occur within a physical context that gives social relationships a salience in spatial terms. The way the body is lived, as well as the position of bodies in relation to each other and in relation to the spaces they move within can be expressive of social and political relationships that are in operation (see Ball, 1973:3).

The location and actions of bodies in space occur in relation to other bodies as well as in relation to social beings. It has long been understood that many acts of deference to those with higher status involve lowering oneself in an intercommunicative action – bowing, kneeling or sitting. Here, the sense of being in a body which is oriented towards other bodies in space means movement can be a symbol of social relations. Spencer noted long ago, ‘being below is habitually associated with defeat’ (Spencer, 1895:193, quoted in Ball, 1973:25). Vietnamese people frequently express the sense of being lower than the average non-Vietnamese. This physical difference is perceived by them to be a marker of alienation and subordination. Likewise, being tall is given a positive attribution. Huy was talking about his friend Thanh,

He’s tall for a Vietnamese, and his eyes are big, so he always manages to get jobs easier somehow than other Vietnamese, people always notice him, you know, because he’s so tall. Everyone always says he has a lucky look.

The perception that Vietnamese people are short, and therefore less noticeable, is common among Vietnamese people. Minh, a woman in her twenties, for example, complained to me that so often she had gone into department stores to look for clothes for herself and shop assistants had suggested that she look in the children’s section for her size.

I always go to Asian stores now. All the other ones have clothes that are too big, really long jeans, and the people serving make me feel like a child.

Vietnamese sentience usually includes the sense of being smaller than the average non-Vietnamese Australian and gives most Vietnamese people an everpresent sense of their marginality in physical terms. Their size is further emphasised by mainstream commentators when referring to violence. The Victorian Assistant Police Commissioner for Crime, for example, said that ‘Vietnamese, because they were small in stature, tended to ‘square the ledger’ by carrying weapons, including
knives and machetes’ (The Age, 18 Feb, 1994). Here, violence was attributed to people’s height and a sense of physical inferiority projected upon them. The human form has here become the predominant marker of race.

Representations of the body

At the same time as reading mainstream Australian society as privileging the physically dominant, Vietnamese people often also confront in their own history the notion that bigger is not necessarily better. One of the most striking photographs of the period of American involvement in Vietnam was a diminutive female Vietcong marching a captured immense American soldier through the jungle. The size and lack of resources of the Vietnamese people was used by the communists as a metaphor for the country, the tiny and poor country of Vietnam able to repel the dominance of resource-rich nations like France and the United States. The negative view that Vietnamese people have of their perceived small stature in Australia is countered by references made to their dexterity and ‘inner’ strength that they see as counteracting the clumsiness and unattractiveness of large frames and obesity. Here again, the perception that overseas Vietnamese are fatter than Vietnamese in their homeland is used by those in the homeland as a physical sign of moral decay, of an assimilation to Western physiques and lifestyles. Returning to Vietnam larger than when one left may be read by those in Vietnam as an image of bounty and high living as well as of spiritual decay. The body is thus viewed as an external representation of the internal self.

In Australia, conflicting messages are received by Vietnamese people about their weight. While the Vietnamese language gives a lexically positive value, ra, to the expression ‘to become fat’, beo ra, and negative value, di, to the expression ‘to become thin’, gay di, the advertising image of thin models has a powerful effect and adds to the appeal of slenderness. Being overweight is most often a mark of the Westernisation of the body. By contrast, slenderness has various meanings, older Vietnamese often finding it an image of frugality and lack of materialism and younger Vietnamese finding it more sexually attractive than overweight bodies. The normative Vietnamese body is thus constructed in different ways and is always in an inter-relationship with dominant images of Western bodies.

8 Viviane Lowe’s research explores these issues when discussing the representations of Vietnamese women historically in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
The media has historically linked Vietnamese-Australians with disease. For example, in one of the earliest newspaper reports of the arrival of Vietnamese boatpeople on our shores, the editor wrote, ‘...we must check these troublesome political arrivals, and send them straight back... We must process these people medically, and fumigate every shirt and slipper they arrive with’ (The Australian, Nov 8, 1977).

This definition of Vietnamese people as unclean and carrying disease creates a justification for ethnic separation as well as a discomfort around physical closeness between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese people. Two of my informants, Mai and Huy, often told me how they sensed the unease that non-Vietnamese people had with touching, or coming close to, Vietnamese people. Both told me that they had reacted to this by withdrawing from bodily proximity to non-Vietnamese. This social construction of Vietnamese bodies as defiled has therefore sustained forms of exclusion and distancing and has, in its turn, influenced the way that Vietnamese bodies are lived. The sense of the aberrant nature of the Vietnamese body is reflected in the following young Vietnamese woman’s response to racism, ‘...I feel sad when I meet some unfriendly people. Maybe there are some misunderstandings, or there is something wrong with my body language..’ (Pine, 1994: 16). This young woman had internalised the blame for an unsettling social situation and interpreted the ‘unfriendliness’ of people as a response to her ‘anomalous’ Vietnamese body praxis. Apparent in this reaction is the sensation of needing to repress the usual movements of one’s body in space and to learn a new ‘body language’ acceptable to the mainstream.

The body and social space

In Vietnam historically, spatial distance was formally kept between individuals of different status (Nha-Trang, 1973:36). The difference in power between the king and his subjects was in practice represented by raising the throne to a higher level than the commoners. In the family the separation between members in space indicated the rank and position of each individual. Women walked behind their

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9 Both Gilman (1985) and Sibley (1995) have discussed the link between the disease metaphor and exclusion.
10 Chapter Two will explore concepts of the body in relation to domestic space.
husbands, and children were not permitted to sit with the adult family members. In this way, relations of power between people were expressed in the spatial relationships between their bodies (ibid). Also, there had to be a correspondence between inner and outer norms in the Confucian moral tradition, which in effect, meant that internalised rules of behaviour had to be expressed in the corporeal. A sense of being unwelcome members of Australian society is thus expressed through the experience Vietnamese people have of their bodies. Apart from any cultural similarities, it is the feeling of physical similarity with other Asian-born people, that is the most frequently remarked upon affinity that Vietnamese people have with another group of Australians. Here, the body creates the associations with another place, and is a constant reminder that people are from another place.

This memory of the past through the body is reinforced by interactions with non-Asian people, who will often comment on, or question, a person’s ethnic identity. In a recent report on the accommodation problems of Indochinese youth, several young people complained that they felt uncomfortable in mainstream refuges because of their physical appearance and therefore completely stopped using such refuges (Ethnic Youth Issues Network, 1990:23). Their sense of physical difference led them to avoid situations where they would be the only Asian, and took them into non-mainstream spaces. The accumulated experiences of physical invisibility and bodily alienation contributes to a scripting of bodies, a normative idea of the Vietnamese body, which in turn becomes a habituated conception of inferiority. Nga, for example, feels that Vietnamese people would not be accepted if they made a lot of noise in public, or otherwise drew attention to themselves. And yet if a group of young Vietnamese males is seen on the street together, it is often seen as a provocation to others (see Chapter 6).

Being physically inconspicuous, although felt to be a mark of subordination, is very often actively condoned. Chau told me often that she tried always to be accommodating of non-Vietnamese people in social settings by allowing them to take a seat before her, never pushing ahead in queues, and, in general, holding back,

> If we do one thing wrong, walking across a road in front of a car, or getting served before they do, then non-Asian people always give us very unfriendly looks, and sometimes even shout out things to us. We can’t take up their jobs, or their places. We have to be really careful.

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At the same time, non-Asian people are perceived to take up all the available space, with their larger bodies, and with the idea that the space belongs more to them than to migrants. Huy, for example, noticed that whenever he caught the Sydney trains and sat next to non-Asian people, both men and women, they would squeeze him aside,

_They just don’t care if they lean right onto us, and open their newspapers right over us._

That non-Asians often occupy space in an unselfconscious manner, is indicative of the very self-conscious way that Vietnamese people experience their bodies in Australia. For example, several times I heard Vietnamese people describe Asians as _black hairs_, usually when referring to both the perceived racism, and the normative bodies of mainstream society. One young unemployed youth told me that _black hairs can’t get jobs_, inferring that as soon as a possible employer saw that an applicant for a job was Asian, it was unlikely that the job would be theirs. This racialisation of their body image by the mainstream forces many Vietnamese people to self-consciously confront a sense of incapacity. As Elizabeth Grosz(1994) has pointed out, histories, representations and cultural lives produce and constitute bodies. It is not just that the body is represented in different ways but that the lived body is itself a product of culture and history (ibid:x). For many Vietnamese people, the body actively engages with their marginality in, and resistance to, Australian cultural life. Thus, while some Vietnamese experience their bodies as confining, others see the possibilities of empowerment through the transgression of spaces. For example, the large number of Vietnamese women undergoing cosmetic surgery to ‘westernise’ their faces attests to their sense of physical subordination. At the same time, the presence of Vietnamese community leaders or representatives in the mainstream media is viewed very positively.

The desire to be physically inconspicuous is symptomatic of a sense of inferiority experienced by Vietnamese people. In the medical realm, where people’s bodies are exposed to the scrutiny of others, for Vietnamese people there is often a discomfort about exposing bodies accustomed to being inconspicuous. There have been numerous documented cases of ‘non-compliance’ to western health practices where Vietnamese people will not agree to undergo tests or follow medical advice (see Manderson & Mathews, 1985:251). This can be seen as a form of resistance against impositions on the body of Vietnamese people, whereas their compliance is to some degree a letting go of their bodies to the dominant culture. Such transgressions rarely go unpunished. The documentation of such cases highlights
the ‘abnormality’ of such behaviour and reinforces ethnic stereotypes. Likewise, the desire of some Asian youth to use their bodies and physical presence in a confronting manner in public spaces can be seen in part as a challenge to their physical liminality. Here, bodies are the means that Vietnamese people have for exerting control and for avoiding containment from the mainstream.

Vietnamese embodiment

In most of the Vietnamese families I have visited, children have close physical contact with adults. Children usually sleep with their parents for quite a few years and parents are physically intimate with their children, caressing them and touching them, carrying them about, and stroking their backs. A child’s older brother and sister, as well as aunts and uncles, grandparents and friends all frequently pick up young children and carry them about. Living in close physical contact with family members is also tied to social life in Vietnam, where the ideal is to have three generations, sometimes four living under the same roof. In Australia it is not uncommon for two Vietnamese families to share a house, and the average number of Vietnam-born people in a dwelling is 5.4 (3 is the national average) (Census, 1991). It is because Vietnamese people are accustomed to living together in close physical proximity, that they find the living arrangements of many non-Vietnamese peculiar, and feel these arrangements express emotional coldness and distance. Nhunh described Anglo-Australians to me as nhu tien, ‘like money’, meaning like cold coins, without warmth, feelings or engagement with others. This definition of the way others are physically, indicates that Vietnamese people frame identity partly in terms of spatial relations. Huy told me,

*I can always tell a Vietnamese, the way they use their hands and their bodies and the way that they hold hands and stroke close friends and people in the family. They seem to be always touching people who are close to them.*

Movements of the body and actions towards others may therefore be a mark of difference.

For Vietnamese people body movement is often used to express what in English is expressed verbally. For example, ‘thankyou’ is thought of as formal and usually unnecessary with family and friends. Thanks are usually expressed indirectly with eye contact, or physical gestures, a smile, or a touch of the hand. Huong has an
Australian husband who she feels never attempted to learn about Vietnamese modes of behaviour. Moments of great shame often occur for her when she feels her husband unwittingly embarrasses her or her family. A number of years ago her husband had assisted in bringing Huong’s parents to Australia, by filling out immigration forms and arranging travel documents. After they had been in Australia for over a month, Huong’s husband complained to Huong that her parents had not thanked him for helping them come to Australia. Wanting to please her husband, she immediately asked her parents to thank her husband. Her parents did as she had requested, but not before they made her feel very ashamed that she had made such a request. She herself wondered how a family member could ever ask to be thanked. This was inconceivable in the Vietnamese context, particularly as Huong’s parents felt that they had expressed gratitude in their behaviour towards Huong’s husband. When I asked Huong exactly how she had experienced their appreciation she said,

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\begin{align*}
\text{When my husband and I met my parents at the airport after they had arrived from Vietnam they held our hands, shaking them and not letting go for a very long time. They were both crying, and they just kept on holding our hands and looking at us. That was their thankyou.}
\end{align*}
\]

It was enough for Huong to feel in her parents’ touch that they were thankful. No words were necessary.

The body is not only expressive emotionally but also carries with it a personal history, that has marked it in various ways. For many, Vietnam has left its physical mark on them and places have become inscribed upon the body. Here the body inscriptions are not just representations of external meanings but are also felt and experienced\(^\text{11}\). In Vietnam as well as in Australia, older women who have betelnut-stained, or lacquered teeth are seen as a link to long-gone rural customs and rituals. When speaking about the war, or about their childhood, people frequently pointed to scars on their bodies that reminded them of certain places or incidents in Vietnam. There are many Vietnamese in Australia who are disabled and disfigured, mostly through injuries relating to the war and its aftermath. Many feel shunned by both wider society and the Vietnamese communities and are not able to find employment. Some, however, gain positive recognition for their disabilities. For example, I have met former south Vietnamese military men who often gain legitimacy as refugees through their war experiences, and within the Vietnamese Community Association are felt to heroically encode all that was lost in Vietnam.

\[^{11}\text{This theoretical meeting between the body as representation and the body as experienced in the world is examined at length by Csordas (1994).}\]
Thus, a limp or a scar can be carried with pride, as it identifies a man with his war experiences. These markings are not written passively on their bodies but link people’s bodies with their past and provide reference points in meandering conversations with people about their lives, their own histories written on their bodies and experienced through them.

The body may also be adorned with various markers of independence, wealth or status. As it is women who usually control the finances in Vietnamese households, women often convert any spare cash into jewellery. Jewellery is a form of investment for women and is often secretly hidden rather than worn. As O’Harrow has pointed out, ‘To give a woman a piece of fine jewellery in Vietnamese tradition is to help confirm her independence as a human being, and for a mother to hand over a piece of jewellery to her daughter is a universally understood gesture, for which the sub-text is “may this protect you from misery” ’ (1995:178). Women also enjoy wearing gold and jade jewellery and precious stones because of this signification. As well as indicating independence or wealth, jade is thought to bring luck. It is not common for Vietnamese men to wear jewellery, however the Confucian heritage has allowed men to mark their bodies in other ways. Men will sometimes grow the nail on their smallest finger very long which symbolises the life of a Confucian scholar, someone who did no manual labour and had the luxury of pursuing intellectual tasks. A long white beard and moustache is also a signifier of an intellectual preoccupation, and of wisdom and knowledge. Young Vietnamese-Australians, like their counterparts in Vietnam (see Marr, 1996:5), do not often transform their bodies permanently or semi-permanently with piercing, tattooing, or shaving their heads (ear piercing is an exception and is common among girls). They usually prefer to decorate their bodies in ways that their parents may not ever see, such as with jewellery, clothing or make-up. Their aim in making only ephemeral changes is not to overly distress their parents. When children do make more permanent changes the intent is often to challenge and to torment their parents more than to increase their appeal to peers.

Exercise of the body is also viewed as a method of controlling and channelling the self. Older Vietnamese often do early morning exercises and movements similar to Tai Chi. These exercises are not intended to increase muscle bulk but, rather, maintain good health and a harmonious relationship between mind and body. This

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12 This suggestion was made to me by Thuy Pham.
desire to discipline the body has its roots in Vietnam where historically the connection was drawn between a healthy, robust body and a fit mind (Marr, 1981:79-81, 298-300; 1996:24-5).

The way in which the body is clothed also holds important meanings regarding status and connections to Vietnam. At public Vietnamese events in Sydney, young women wear ao dai, the Vietnamese women’s national dress (a long close-fitting tunic with flowing wide pants), as most women still do in Vietnam on public occasions and events like weddings and graduations. While most older Vietnamese women still wear a simple blouse and pants for daily use, the vast array of consumer images available to young Vietnamese-Australians has meant that the body has become something to display. In Australia, for example, Vietnamese women at evening events are often dressed in sequined and satin gowns to create an impression of wealth and as an affirmation of social status. The workers in a textile shop in Cabramatta told me, 

_Everyone wants shiny material. We couldn’t get that sort of thing in Vietnam so here they love it. Sparkling, glittery materials are even really popular with men when they go out at night. I think because all the materials in Vietnam were dark. It doesn’t have to be shiny - red and other bright colours are just as good._

My observation is that the same changes are occurring in Vietnam as textiles from China flood the market. At a wedding I attended in Hanoi in November, 1995, two women were wearing ao dai covered in sequined flower arrangements. In both Vietnam and Australia these new physical displays of wealth are widely accepted and much more easily attainable than larger consumer items.

Apart from the body being changed and created through life and carrying marks from impressions of life’s experiences, physiognomy is a highly respected form of understanding a person’s character for many Vietnam-born people. In this understanding, the body not only expresses the course of one’s life, but can represent to others one’s character and identity. Here, the subject is equated directly with the body. Recent analysis of corporeality by Grosz (1994) has attempted to move the body into the central focus of analysis ‘so that it can now be understood as the very “stuff” of subjectivity’ (p.ix). Where the mind has taken precedence over the body in much western analysis, this would seem an important step in understanding non-western corporeality. It is clear that the body is viewed by many
Vietnamese people as the central means of understanding the self\textsuperscript{13}. Physical illness may be seen as a sign of spiritual disharmony; birthmarks, scars and individual physical characteristics carry meaning and inform the social world of an individual’s interior self. The voice and language are also thought to be an important expression of the embodied self. The language of stories from Vietnam and legends told by older people to children thus become vehicles for feeling at home.

Legends are so frequently employed in order to examine one’s life, that sometimes even non-Vietnamese legends and folktales are used as explanatory tools. In one family I visited, the father, Binh, frequently played the Disney video, \textit{The Little Mermaid}, to his children to explain his understanding of exile. The story, based on the Grimm fairy tale, is about a mermaid with an exceptional singing voice. On a visit to the water’s surface she becomes enamoured with a young prince and decides to live on land. In order to swap her tail for legs she must lose her voice and is told that her legs will give her enormous pain. She willingly gives up her voice and suffers pain just to experience life on land. However, when she arrives on the land, she finds the prince is marrying someone else, and as she is voiceless she cannot let her feelings be known. It is not until her sisters come to her rescue that she can change back again to a mermaid. The allegorical tale of the little mermaid expressed to Binh the suffering one must endure to live in a different world, the experience of voicelessness in the new world, the seeming irreversibility of the decision to renounce one’s home, the shattering of the dream of prosperity, and, finally, the importance of support from one’s family. Binh told me,

\begin{quote}
I still feel like the little mermaid. I cannot be heard, my tail - that’s like all that I know and can do well - is gone, and I am in a world I don’t really understand. And on top of that when I use my legs - I think of them as all my new skills and knowledge of this country - it is very painful and they don’t really work very well.
\end{quote}

This example indicates how legendary tales are seized upon so readily to understand experience and that when there are no Vietnamese stories to fit the

\textsuperscript{13} In the Cabramatta by-election in late 1994, a Vietnamese newspaper, \textit{Dai Viet}, revealed that a fortune-teller’s analysis of the physical features of one of the candidates, stated that ‘the gap between her two front teeth was a fault which destroyed the noble physiognomy of her mouth’ (reported in \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 14 October, 1994, p.7). That a newspaper could carry an article about the physiognomy of a politician reveals the extent to which such analysis is accepted by its readership.
experience, a non-Vietnamese substitute has to be selected. The selection of the story of the little mermaid also reflects the sensation both of physical difference that Vietnamese people feel after migration as well as the sense of the profound lack of an ability to vocalise within this society and the sense that the migrant body is regulated and controlled.

**Discussion**

The way that bodies are marked as being associated with another place, both for Vietnamese people and non-Vietnamese, means that the body has particular salience when attempting to understand Vietnamese identity in Australia. The theoretical sociology of Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 1990) aims to make revelations about the actions and positions of social actors within a matrix of time and space. He introduces time and space into his theoretical work through the notions of habitus and field. The strategies of social actors are analysed through the notion of *habitus*, an analytic device involving an agent’s embodied dispositions within a socially differentiated environment. In an attempt to understand the basis for the reproduction of social inequities, Bourdieu employs *habitus* as the dispositions that are embodied and learned through early body experiences in time and space and which replicate social divisions. He explores the systems of thought and action, *fields*, through which all experience is filtered, and which experience creates. Although the patterns of embodied behaviour become taken-for-granted, people are not puppets, but, rather, are employing strategies in relation to shifting possibilities. It is through these early bodily experiences in time and space that actors engage in social worlds of inequality, and through which they place others. The body remembers these relations as it moves about in the world. All sentient engagement in the world is thus informed by social and historical conditions. The institutionalised social spaces of the family, the economy and politics all interact with the bodies in an ongoing dynamic. Individuals are able, through their habitus, to orient their action to converge with these institutions.

Although Bourdieu did not articulate the means by which social actors may experience habitus if thrust into a different social world, as occurs with refugees, we might assume that there is an ongoing dynamic between the embodied experiences of the earlier life in other spaces and those in the new adopted country. I here employ Bourdieu’s notion of the shifting possibilities of social life through
which individuals improvise strategies at any moment. Here, actors do not simply follow pre-determined cultural rules, but, instead, follow dispositions operating through culture. In the case of Vietnamese-Australians, embodied behaviours learned in Vietnam are not simply replicated in this new social environment, but, rather, are enacted through social relations as strategic practices. That is, in changing situations such as those that migration produces, individuals reproduce class structures through cultural dispositions that are existentially immediate. In this way, Vietnamese-Australians may unconsciously reinforce their marginality in Australia through a *habitus* of culturally embodied difference. As was shown earlier, Vietnam has left its physical mark on Vietnamese-Australian people, and places have become encoded on the body. The way that Vietnamese people use their bodies in space, and are positioned in relation to both Vietnamese and with non-Vietnamese people communicates social meaning. The physical estrangement that many feel in relation to wider society can be used to challenge marginality, but very often reinforces the difference and subordination experienced by Vietnamese people.
Chapter Two

Virtual home

When I first met Huy he was not on speaking terms with his younger brother Manh. Huy had chosen a house to buy for his extended family – for his parents, his wife Hoa and their three children, as well as for Manh and his new wife. He had been in Australia for five years and this was his first house. However, he needed the financial support of Manh and Hoa’s family to make it possible. Manh preferred to be near his own wife’s family in Marrickville, in the inner west of Sydney, yet Huy’s choice was in Cabramatta, near the centre of town. Manh had refused to enter the deal and did not want to even see the house that Huy suggested. After persuasion from their parents Manh reluctantly agreed to see the house. Huy took the whole family to the site in order to persuade them. He pointed out the propitious features of the house and the block – firstly it was a very square block, it was on a sloping street but not at the top or the bottom, its front door was hidden from the street, and it had a thick hedge along the street side of the house. It had four bedrooms and was within walking distance from Cabramatta. As Manh heard Huy point out the features of the house and the block of land, which all conformed very well to the prescriptions of Vietnamese geomancy\(^\text{14}\), he began to change his mind. Manh was finally convinced and agreed to contribute money to the purchase of the

\(^{14}\)The basis for geomantic predictions is found in the cosmology of Taoism which defines the preferred arrangements of objects in the material world as incorporating spiritual values. The principles of this system outline the ideal spatial arrangements in the built and created environment which are to reflect the harmony of the natural world. Geomancy refers to the most auspicious placement and positioning of land, houses, doors as well as the position of graves, and furniture such as the conjugal bed. It is not only the location of a grave or house that is important but also the timing of a burial or the commencement of building. It is thought that the position of both houses and burials can influence not only the activities that will be associated with the building but will also impinge upon the lives of children and future generations. The most favourable position for a house is to stand beside other houses, but not to join them, and to face south, as the north is exposed to malevolent spirits and menacing weather. It is not favourable to be located at the end of a junction (such as a T-intersection) or to be either at the top of a hill or at the base of a valley. One should not be able to enter a house directly. It is preferable to pass into the house via a side passage or gate which leads to the front door, or behind a screen of plants such as bamboo. This is in order to avoid attracting negative influence into the home. In the past, in Vietnam, a geomancer would be consulted to determine the best site for a new building and for graves. Not only are evil spirits avoided, but also, one can attract prosperity and good fortune by setting furniture or a house in an auspicious position. Thus a new shop will be very successful if the owners consult a geomancer before buying it, or before they set out the interiors (Information here was given to me by several informants and is confirmed in Nguyen Khac Tung, 1993:16-17).
house under the condition that, after one year, Huy would then also contribute financial support for a house in Marrickville for Manh and his wife. The argument was settled. Money was borrowed from many sources including choi hui, the Vietnamese informal money-lending system. The day that Huy’s extended family moved into the house Manh noticed a banana tree in the back garden that no-one had pointed out before. The tree was laden with green bananas, and one of the hands of bananas was like an enormous double hand, with more than a dozen bananas suspended from it. Manh was so excited, he ran into the house shouting,

_Huy, this is the right house. This is a very lucky house. Look at the banana tree, we will have good fortune here. You were right, older brother. This is a special place._

Everyone poured out of the house to see the banana tree. Huy and Manh’s parents went up to the tree and prayed to it, quietly muttering incantations for prosperity and good fortune.

This story reveals the manner in which the interweaving of past lives in Vietnam are reflected in the choice of dwelling of Vietnamese in Australia. The key elements of this story are; that it is preferable for the extended family to occupy one house\textsuperscript{15}, owning a home is a primary concern of Vietnamese families, the choice of a house follows geomantic prescriptions, there is pooling of resources among family members to purchase a house, and the physical environment is examined for signs it may bring (such as the abundance of bananas) regarding the future fortunes of the family. In this chapter I will examine this process whereby the landscape and physical environment is imbued with meaning by diasporic Vietnamese. Following phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (1962,1963), I contend that a fundamental aspect of human experience is the confluence of bodies and space against a temporal backdrop. Space and time not only intervene in human relationships and human praxis but those relations and activities at the same time produce spatial and temporal meaning\textsuperscript{16}. This study will highlight the phenomenal processes in which identities are mediated by activities within lived spaces.

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\textsuperscript{15} A 1995 survey of married women in Hanoi found a similar overwhelming preference for extended families living together - ‘..87% of respondents under 25 years of age would like to live with their children upon getting old, 11.5% would prefer to live nearby, 0.0% wished to live with someone else, and 1.4% had no opinion’ (in Marr’s recent article on youth in Vietnam today [1996:7]).

\textsuperscript{16} I have found Friedland and Boden (1994) helpful in elucidating the interface between time and space.
A few months after the family had moved into the house, I was sitting with Huy in his living room (phong khach - guest room). This room is usually the first room one enters, and introduces visitors to the multiform composition of Vietnamese homes, a site where individual taste may be expressed at the same time as a particular cultural aesthetic is foregrounded. The room was simply furnished with four sitting chairs around a low wooden table. There were four prints on the walls, two were traditional scenes of village life in Vietnam; a woman bent over while working in a rice paddy and a young boy with a water buffalo. The other two were scenes of Vietnam’s natural beauty, one a mountain scene, and the other one a coastal view of laughing people on a beach. In the corner of the room was a wooden altar for ancestor worship topped with a small ceramic box, incense, fruit and a cup of tea. Huy looked relaxed and comfortable in his home. He spoke to me about what he felt about home in Australia,

I remember when I arrived. It was winter. Very cold. I missed my family so much. I felt so empty and lonely. I thought of Vietnam every night before sleep in my bed. Slowly, slowly I felt better. I put photographs of my family around my room, and some small posters of Vietnam. I set up a small shrine to worship my ancestors in a corner of that room. Gradually I felt more comfortable going out and exploring the city. And when I met some people my family once knew they showed me where I could buy things to make Vietnamese food, and where I could find newspapers in Vietnamese. And when my wife and son arrived I rented a small apartment for us near the centre of Cabramatta and we were so happy to be together again in that place. When I first took my wife into Cabramatta to see the shops she was so happy to see so many Vietnamese faces and was very surprised that she could use Vietnamese everywhere to buy things. More and more we made many Vietnamese friends, and when we bought this house we felt

17 It is unusual for Vietnamese people in Australia to build their own home. They usually buy houses in already established areas. In Vietnam, although there are no celebrations for moving into a pre-existing home, there are numerous rituals that are often observed in the construction of a new house, particularly in rural areas. As well as ceremonies that mark the beginning of construction, after a house is built, the owner holds a ceremony to call upon ancestors as well as the God of the Soil (tho than) to bless the construction so that the site may offer future prosperity (Nguyen Khac Tung, 1993:38-41). Sometimes a banquet for friends and relatives will also be provided by the owner on this occasion of blessing the new house.

18 Altars for ancestor worship may contain incense burners, candlesticks, ivory chopsticks, flowers, and a tray of offerings of food and drinks. These may surround a big lacquer board which lists the names of the dead.
really good. That was very important to us, buying the house. We felt safe and happy that our children would be free here and always have that home. They could do well in life then.

Huy’s story illustrates that having a ‘home’, both a metaphorical and physical space grounded in both domestic and local spheres, is a central concern in the lives of Vietnamese-Australians. The massive social and political upheavals in their country had forced many Vietnamese people to uproot numerous times before they eventually fled their country. Many then endured the enormous stress of often dangerous departures over sea and the emotional turmoil of separation from family. Of those who survived, most then were held in detention in refugee camps for at least one year. The space of internment is almost always remembered as a painful and humiliating experience. Many Vietnamese people remember the period as one is which they felt contained, controlled, and helplessly dependent upon those who held institutional power. Against this background of multiple separations and terrors, and their emplacement into different geographical landscapes, it has become paramount for many to ‘settle’ in one place, to find a ‘home’ in a country very different from their country of birth, but nevertheless accepting of them as refugees or as migrants.

In this chapter concerning the different spaces inhabited by Vietnamese people living in Australia, I employ a variety of sources and numerous informants but will concentrate in particular on the lives of two families, that of Huy, above, and Nga. Although having spent more than half her life in Australia, Nga, like many other young Vietnamese, sees the social and physical environment here through the lens of Vietnam.

The significations of the house

By being part of a diaspora, a people connected to each other through ties to their homeland, Vietnamese people may imbue their spaces with physical and social reminders of that homeland of their imaginations and memory. The spaces and connections of an earlier life in Vietnam reveal themselves in Vietnamese people’s continued engagement with the houses of family in their homeland. This was

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19The work of Thompson (1994) on the nature of ‘home’ for migrant women provides valuable insight on the empowering effects that control over domestic spaces confers to the lives of migrants. She also reveals the importance of home as a recompense for loss and as a representation of success.
demonstrated to me by Huy, who with his family, were involved in buying a house for his father’s brother in Vietnam. The family in Australia had sent a few thousand dollars about twice every year to their relatives. They all wanted the money to be spent on a house. This suggests the importance of their feeling that they had left a residue of themselves in Vietnam. The defining characteristics of home are also articulated through experiences in Vietnam as Huy indicated when speaking about his notion of home,

_As for me, my house is all my family, it's not just the bricks and furniture, it's my wife and my children too. In Vietnam, it is usually much more than that, it's three or more generations all living together._

That is a house.

Huy reminded me of the associations in the word for house – _nha_. A wife or husband can be referred to as _nha_, or _nha toi_ means my wife/husband (literally – ‘my house’). Depending on the context, it can also mean the whole family living together in one house, _nha toi_ – my family. And in Vietnam it is also the word for the state – _nha nuoc_ (literally – the country’s house). These multiple meanings of _nha_ indicate that the social world, the physical environment and the nation are conceptualised as being fundamentally linked. The family is not just viewed as a physical place where several generations dwell, but the actual house and land are often viewed as being inseparable from that family, being invested with the family’s history and its presence, being the site of both ancestral bodies and the traces of the work of ancestors in old structures and plantings\(^\text{20}\). The house is not only a space for sleeping and eating, but may also have religious significance because of ancestor worship. It is also the central place for educating the young in the Vietnamese moral code, and for caring for ageing relatives. In the Vietnamese countryside today it may still be the place where children are born, where the sick are cared for, and where family members die and are buried. As so many of the most pivotal life events...

\[\text{\footnotesize 20} \text{In Vietnam, the association between a stable family and a physically stable house is expressed in the following folksong giving advice to a new daughter-in-law:}
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From the moment you come to live here as a daughter in law,
I must warn you and advise you carefully.
My old mother is very severe,
Be economical and make concessions to my parents' wishes.
You should resign yourself to the maintenance of our family unity,
To the protection of rafters, pillars, main beams of the house.
You should yield yourself to the benefit of our marital relationship.
events take place in the home, the notion of home for Vietnamese rises far above that of a dwelling place.

I have already mentioned how conceptions of the home for Vietnamese-Australians are tied up with the past. Here I will enter the realm of personal space and examine how space is mapped in the everyday activities and social worlds of the home. As Bachelard has written, the house, by being inscribed with memories, is at the heart of 'the topography of our intimate being' (Bachelard, 1969:xxxii). The house is an idiom of *habitus*, and reflects a series of physical and conceptual habits. Huy had spoken about the value of the family house as *the only thing we Vietnamese people have for ourselves here in Australia*. Other stories told to me by Vietnamese people confirm the potency of domestic space in affirming the family’s social existence as well as their autonomy. In Vietnamese notions of home, family relationships are central. The past experiences of people in houses in Vietnam are often remembered as a continuum of dynamic relations. Huong remembered her grandmother caring for her, the death of her grandfather, an aunt and her family moving in to share the house – as well as events such as Tet. Not only is the physical environment coded into the milieu of the house, but relationships with the past may also be represented with photos, or other visual cues. Nhung often referred to the significance of her home in reminding her of her homeland and the relatives left behind. Rather than being painful, these memories were satisfying and pleasurable,

*We all miss our homes, miss Vietnam and our families so much. We like to have little things that make us remember everyone back home. I like to have bamboo growing, and really bright flowers at Tet. Sometimes I walk outside and try to imagine I am there, try to hear the sounds and smell the smells. Even those noisy, crowded streets I miss. I guess I should just accept it here, but I like to be reminded. I like to growing all the Vietnamese herbs. I like the smell the pho cooking. Anyway, it doesn’t bother anyone.*

Apart from expressing her attachments to the sensual environment of Vietnam, Nhung was also indicating how the private spaces of Australian houses and gardens allowed her to re-experience the sensual world of her past, without ‘bothering’ anybody, and without being judged. While for some, Australian houses restrict

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21A review of the anthropological literature on this topic is found in Lawrence and Low (1990).

22Thompson (1994:38) reports a Vietnamese woman stating, ‘...we set up everything look like back home...’ and confirms that for many migrant women the private house creates ‘a climate of comfort to facilitate the expression of difference’.
their choice of interiors and gardens, for Nhung, it unfolded possibilities. The home of a Vietnamese person in Australia can therefore provide for the expression of memory by enabling a replication of Vietnamese interiors, while also being a haven in an often hostile environment. The home is strategically chosen as the idiom through which many deal with the loss of both their homeland and the physical and emotional worlds which that land encompassed.

Although Vietnamese-Australians all choose very different furnishings, paintings, and textures in their Australian homes, few have told me that their home is primarily understood as a place to express individual style. Having control over space is an important way to manage the effects of feeling powerlessness in wider society. Control may be achieved by an idiosyncratic use of space but very often the interiors of Vietnamese homes at the same time reveal a sense of a shared aesthetic with other Vietnamese. Displaying images of Vietnam or making prominent one’s ancestral altar allows people to feel a sense of continuity and community when they visit each other’s homes. The refugee experience frequently erodes feelings of confidence and it is often felt that a home may be suddenly lost. Home ownership induces feelings of prosperity as it is the most palpable evidence for many of permanence. For many families, it is also important that they can inform their relatives in Vietnam that they have acquired a house. Many send photographs of the house back to Vietnam and some feel this represents a vindication of their decision to leave their homeland. The houses and homes of Vietnamese families are crucial vehicles through which they may memorialise Vietnam in interior and garden design and usage at the same time as it indicates accomplishment.

It is also crucial to see the home of most Vietnamese-Australians as the only space in which their actions are not entirely regulated by others. Although their control is never complete, and it is those in power who grant them the space, the home remains the key site for the expression of a Vietnamese cultural aesthetic at the same time as it harbours the possibility of ownership. While entire localities, such as Cabramatta, may also be idioms of control and empowerment, they are more obviously the sites in which a juxtaposition of community and state occurs. It is because of this that the home alone becomes emblematic of empowerment and assists people in dealing with the sense of loss that has accompanied leaving their homeland, families, and homes behind (see also Thompson, 1994). Thuy, Huy’s sister-in-law, revealed the importance of owning a house for a feeling of security,
In Vietnam, when I was a child we moved a dozen times because of the war and economic hardship. We were often sharing houses with my father's brothers and sisters. And then after that, when we escaped from our country, we were in the Philippines in a refugee camp for one and a half years. When we arrived in Australia I longed to stay in one place and to be able to own a house. We have still moved a lot but it has always been in Sydney and always to better and better houses as we were able to work and save more money. It is mostly for our children, though, not just for us. We think it is very important that they have a home and that their parents provide that home for them. We were not so lucky in Vietnam. All children should know that they have a home.

A house may be the most essential form of concrete and manifest achievement offered to Vietnamese people and a symbol of a transition to a state of being more permanently rooted. Thuong, Thuy's sister, told me,

Yes, having a house is very important to show what we got for our sacrifices, to show our children what can be done, and to show others that we achieved something is Australia. It also shows our children how necessary it is to rely on one's family, we all join our money to help buy a house. The children can see that, and see also that we help our other family members when they need money to buy their houses. We mostly came with nothing, and we worked and struggled and had to face many problems, and having a house is something we can see for our efforts. It's not like having a job or speaking English well, it's something others can see with their eyes. We are successful, we did this for our children, look at our house!

Here Thuong revealed the centrality of achievement in replacing the privations experienced through the separation from Vietnam. She also makes comments upon the sacrifice required, not only in leaving Vietnam, but also in making a new life elsewhere. Many other Vietnamese women and men mentioned the struggle involved in fulfilling their desire to own a home – the long hours of work and the frugal lifestyle necessary to save money. It appears that for some people home ownership is also an important entree into Australian society. That it will be recognised as an achievement by non-Vietnamese, some people believe, may lead to their acceptance.

It would be impossible for most Vietnamese to realise their desire to own a house in Australia if they did not have the help of family and friends. Having a large,
extended family makes it easier to afford large outlays of cash. Choi hui is a means by which people do not need to rely on their immediate families for money. Hui is an informal community banking system. This system is very popular in Vietnam as well as within the Vietnamese community in Australia. The Hui system or Hui circle is designed to provide loans and saving investments amongst relatives and/or friends without going through the formal banking system or the pawn shop network. Considering the high unemployment rates, low income levels and the relatively short time that most Vietnamese people have been in Australia, there is an extremely high rate of home ownership - 52% of dwellings occupied by Vietnam-born people are owned or being purchased (see Appendix, pp.283-4). To create such a high level of home ownership there has usually been considerable pooling of resources between family members. The Vietnamese response to materialism is usually not to focus on self but to share with the family. Often there is quite an emphasis on materialism in everyday talk but people do not normally keep possessions for themselves. Spending a lot of money on oneself is considered utter extravagance and this is perhaps a reason why buying a house is an acceptable way of spending a large sum as people can say it is for their children (which they almost always do) and this is seen as honourable.

The possession of a house is for many the final and most lasting signifier of rootedness and is the exemplification of a fixity, the end of a long metamorphosis from impermanence. This stability is not only related to possession of a valued item or financial achievement but also to family continuity – a place where children may grow up and not be 'forced' to move elsewhere as were their parents or grandparents. Bachelard sees the house as being engraved with the personal history of houses we have inhabited, a body of images 'that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability' (1969:17). For Vietnamese people the childhood home has disappeared, and the houses in refugee camps are almost always seen as hostile spaces. In Australia the desire of Vietnamese to make the home reflect permanence and an escape from uncertainty means that the house may represent the shifts in life itself. Homes are thus also places of psychosocial significance, and often represent immunity from the instability that was common in their homes of the past. However, family conflict, depression and mental illness are primarily confronted within the home. This means that the home may also be experienced with ambivalence and confusion.
While the houses of Vietnamese-Australians provide avenues for impressing memories upon a physical form, they are also places that juxtapose Vietnam and Australia. This blending and contrasting of social and physical worlds may also extend to the local neighbourhood and suburb. But the home is not only the intersection of two cultural spheres, it is also the idiom through which empowerment and control may be manifest. The house is thus rich with meaning, providing inhabitants with feelings of certainty and projecting them into the future at the same time as capturing the past from another time and place. The house has thus become, for many Vietnamese people, the incarnation of desires. The notion of home thus also carries with it its opposite, being always a contrast to the unknown, and to rootlessness. De Certeau has written of the sense of absence that accompanied places. He writes, 'What can be seen designates what is no longer there' (de Certeau, 1988: 108). This polarity is potently felt by those who have been displaced. For them the house may represent all that is lost and may intensify all the feeling of separation.

The process of purchasing a house frequently reveals these desires in a tangible way. I went with Huy’s sister, Hien, when she was househunting. Firstly we consulted a Vietnamese fortune-teller who said that that year, 1994, was definitely the one that she should buy a house. The location was very important. It had to be near Huy and her parents’ house. Most important, it had to satisfy the requirements of Vietnamese geomancy as had her brother’s house. Beliefs about astrology arising from the lunar calendar direct people’s choices about the timing of certain events – when babies should be conceived, when a marriage should take place, when to buy a house, and when to travel – as well as the spacing and emplacement of buildings. Certain aspects of the environment are seen to harbour religious power. The environment is filled with signs that may suggest that people look to their surrounds for answers to difficult choices they may have. The natural world in Vietnam can be transparent and reveal religious meanings to people, such as the presence of spirits or the activities of ancestors. Through the long process of Hien’s househunting, numerous houses were rejected for not satisfying the

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23Although most Vietnamese-Australians choose the location (both the city and the suburb) of their home in order to be near relatives, there are often religious reasons. They may wish to be near their pagoda or church, or with other people who attend the same places of worship. In 1995, some Buddhist relics which have been circulating in numerous Asian countries were transferred to the Vietnamese Buddhist Association in Adelaide. Since that time the pagoda in Adelaide has become a pilgrimage site for many Vietnamese Buddhists in Australia and some of them are moving to South Australia as a result of the presence of these relics.
requirements of the traditional positioning of houses - one house was an 'odd' shape, one block sloped too strongly, another looked upon a graveyard. She was also unhappy with a house if it did not reveal any significant meanings in the landscape – in one house Hien said that the garden looked 'dead' and that this was a bad sign. For Hien, external space had to be organised into small areas in a controlled manner – she particularly liked paved courtyards because they reminded her of Vietnam. The garden was the junction between the outside public domain and the inner, private world of the house. Although Hien did also mention other requirements such as the number of bedrooms and bathrooms, when these were satisfied in certain houses, omens or premonitions about those houses would then predominate in her decision-making.

In spite of the cosmological importance of houses, the physical and architectural nature of houses are also important to Vietnamese families. Many find it appealing to have a house that has the appropriate size and number of rooms to allow for opportunities to entertain large numbers of people, especially at Tet (see Chapter 9). On the evening of Tet large parties are held. Often two or more extended families share the preparation for the party which is held in one person's house. Over the following days most people continuously visit each other's houses. Shrines to the ancestors are often erected specially for Tet and are open to view in a prominent position in the living room. Tet cards from relatives in Vietnam and throughout the worldwide diaspora are also displayed, either hung on walls, in cabinets, or on bench or table surfaces.

The use of space in Australian houses differs profoundly from that in houses in Vietnam, revealing the complex ways in which social and cultural relations are manifest in the domestic sphere. While both have a central guest room into which one enters the house first, in Vietnam this room is often used for other purposes - as a work space, a sleeping area, for eating and sometimes for cooking. In both Vietnam and Australia, the main guest areas including the entrance foyer, the living room and the dining room the prime sites for ornamental significations of Vietnam. Most people possess paintings and prints from Vietnam and display other items, such as lacquerware boxes, clocks or oil lamps in noticeable positions (see Plates 3-8). The furniture is often cherrywood which is popular in Vietnam. A common arrangement of furniture favoured in Vietnam is the positioning of two wooden straight-backed chairs against a wall with a square wooden table between. This arrangement is also widespread in China. The chairs may be high-backed and
Plate 3. Ancestral shrine, Sydney home

Plate 4. Lacqueware artwork made in Vietnam, Sydney home
The work includes images of women working in rice fields, children riding water buffaloes, fishermen, and woodcarriers
Plate 5. Tet decoration, Sydney home
Although more usually erected only at Tet, this particular decoration is kept in the same position year round as it is made of paper placed upon branches. The yellow flowers represent the southern Vietnamese Tet flower *hoa mai*.

Plate 6. Artwork from Vietnam, clock from United States, Sydney home
The clock is in the shape of Vietnam, and carries the pre-1975 southern flag.
Plate 7. Furnishing and decorations, Canberra home
This display cabinet carries both Vietnamese and ‘European’ figurines.

Plate 8. Artwork, Sydney home
Painted silk scroll, child on water buffalo
elaborately carved, often with inlaid mother-of-pearl. In both Vietnam and Australia the style of the chairs signify the status of the inhabitants (see Plates 9-10). Memories of Vietnam are conjured up throughout the rest of the house, very often through displayed photographs. Many people also have altars, ornaments, statues, and may hang Vietnamese calendars and poetry. It is also popular to raise fish in an aquarium. In the gardens or on verandahs traditional plants, ponds, paving and courtyards reflect spaces in Vietnam.

The interior of the houses are crowded with echoes of the past because the home embodies the enclosure of past worlds of the imagination. The physical fragments of past life in Vietnam were often taken out of the country in boats. Soon after getting to know most Vietnamese families, I have often been shown photographs of their families, both in Australia and in Vietnam. The photographs from Vietnam were the most precious. Of those people who had escaped Vietnam by boat, there were very few photographs, if any at all. Some photographs were later sent to refugees after they had arrived in Australia, by relatives left in Vietnam. The photographs of life in a refugee camp were for some the only photographs of the past that linked them to the Vietnam that they had.

Ancestors and ancestor worship are a central element in most homes. Most families who worshipped their ancestors in Vietnam continue to do so on Australia and have set up an altar in the main room of the house (see Plate 3). Some people have even carried the ashes of a family member to Australia, usually in a small lacquer box or in a ceramic jar. Nga’s father had carried his own father’s ashes back to Australia, and he kept them in a small ceramic container in the ancestral shrine. Almost all altars carry photographs of deceased relatives, usually parents and grandparents and sometimes even great-grandparents. Placed on the altar are incense and items of food and drink that are offered to the deceased family members. At death anniversaries as well as at other times during the year such as Tet, and upon the marriage of any family member, the ancestors are worshipped by offering special foods and standing before the altar to pray and to kow-tow.

Although many Vietnamese will set up altars in even the most temporary housing, such as in a refugee camp, others wait until they have a home which feels secure. Khanh’s family in Canberra lived in a government apartment for three years without an altar, but when they were granted a government house, they erected a very prominent altar in the living room. Khanh explained that moving to that house made
Plate 9. Living room, Hanoi
Couple seated on Chinese chairs in a living room. The room clearly indicates the owners’ wealth as it contains artworks, flowers, and a telephone. The chairs are intricately carved Vietnamese copies of an older Chinese style.

Plate 10. Living room, Hanoi
Woman seated on a wooden chair in a room with few objects and no artwork. Two straight backed wooden chairs with a wooden table between is a popular furniture arrangement, yet these two photographs indicate the enormous variability in style.
the family feel finally settled. His wife told me that they did not bother with an altar in the apartment because they were so concerned at looking to the future, trying to adjust to life in Australia, learning the language and getting work that they never wanted to look back, only forward. Even though they did not own the house, the transfer there from the apartment coincided with several other changes in the couple’s fortunes. After several years of unemployment while he studied English, Khanh had just secured a job in a Vietnamese bakery, and his wife had started learning English after having stayed at home with their young children for three years. They suddenly felt as if they belonged more in Australia than in Vietnam and Khanh explained to me that this was the time to cement his relationship to Vietnam, to teach his young children about their ancestors and about their country, just at the moment where all could so easily be forgotten. The altar for Khanh’s family was much more meaningful for them than a photograph or calendar of their country. It signified a relationship, both within a family and to a country. The family had installed a permanent light on the altar that glowed red through day and night. The everpresent fruit and tea was placed there both to remind the family of their ancestors and to invigorate their relationship to the past. The effect of this altar, as with many others, was a sense of it being a tangible pathway to a place beyond the home, to a family still held dear and to a lost country.

At home in language

One of the ways of conveying the feeling of being at home for many Vietnamese people in Australia is being immersed in Vietnamese language and literature. Experience is carried into language and is a conduit through which the life-world becomes present. To describe this phenomenon, Heidegger (1971[1959]) has said that ‘language is the house of being’. A home may be one of the few places that people feel free to speak Vietnamese. The way that ‘home’ becomes enmeshed in Vietnamese stories is exemplified in the importance of the story of ‘Kieu’ (Truyen Kieu) 24. This story was written in a lyrical and poetic style by Nguyen Du (1765-

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24 The story follows the life of a woman called Kieu, from the time she is a young woman living with her parents, until a few decades later in her life. In an attempt to save her parents from imprisonment after they are wrongly accused of a misdeed, she is sold into prostitution. From the brothel she suffers one misfortune after another, becoming enslaved into a family, unwittingly becoming a prostitute again, and finally after attempting suicide she is saved and lives a nun-like existence in obscurity. The story is set against a backdrop of war, corruption and striking class differentiation. Kieu is seen by many Vietnamese as a very noble woman. Even though she suffers, she does so through her own goodness, firstly
1820) and all 3,000 lines of the poem are known by heart by most Vietnamese people over the age of about forty. In urban south Vietnam every child had to study the story at school, until the change of government in 1975. In country areas with high illiteracy rates many people learnt to recite the story of Kieu by hearing parts of it spoken every night by older people.

Kieu is a tale of much significance to Vietnamese people as it sets out many of the moral precepts that have guided the lives of many older Vietnamese people. Filial piety, the virtue of women and the ideals of womanhood are central themes. The story also deals with a question close to the heart of many Vietnamese people: how can love and duty be fulfilled at the same time? As well as these questions, Kieu deals with many other issues of historical importance to Vietnamese people – war, corruption and social differentiation. The importance of Kieu is summed up by Nga who told me,

*When I escaped from Vietnam with my family in the boat I was 9 years old....After more than 7 attacks by pirates who stole everything we had, and who made the women suffer terribly, we were all in a very bad state. I was seasick. My mother was crying because the last gang of pirates had tried to take my baby brother from her. Someone had taken the pirates attention away from her and this saved him at the last moment. We were all hungry and the smell had become really bad after three days, all so crowded in such a small space. And then this lady started reciting Kieu, and everyone fell silent listening to her. And I could see people’s mouths move with the words of the story that they know so well. And I remember it just made everyone feel at home, we felt great comfort. And then a tanker came to save us, and my mother always said that Kieu saved us, the magic of it. ....Maybe after that my mother always has worshipped Kieu like it is her Bible or something. When she first came to Australia the very first thing she bought was a Kieu and an Vietnamese-English dictionary – but they are opposite things! You know what I mean – Kieu is Vietnam and the last thing you need here in Australia. As if she needed to translate Kieu with her dictionary, ha! ...She is so mad about Kieu, that now, fifteen years later by attempting to save her family, and later through naive trust of others. In spite of having had a string of lovers, by the end of the story she is finally redeemed because she gives up her sexuality to live with her first adolescent love in a marriage which, it is agreed, will be free of bodily passion.*
she still recites parts of it most nights when she is washing up with me and my brothers.

The story of Kieu is available in all Vietnamese bookshops in Sydney. There is a miniature version available that people can carry in their pocket. The most important bilingual version of the story is dedicated ‘To Vietnamese refugees and their friends throughout the world’ (Nguyen Du, 1983:i). Nga’s depiction of Kieu reveals the extent to which the story gives Vietnamese people within the diaspora an entry into the world of Vietnam, wherever they are in the world.

The sense in which the language and stories of Vietnam allow Vietnamese people to feel at home in the world reinforces the notion that language creates the first dwelling place, and is the first universe that one takes root in. There is frequently, in Australian popular conceptions (as evidenced in the media), fear about the development of suburbs in Australia where English is frequently not spoken. However, the sense of being at home in one’s own language, is very marked for people from non-European background. For Vietnamese people, seeing street signs, advertisements and newspapers in their own language is a comforting feeling. Use of one’s own language is felt to be most comfortable in the home. The effortless use of one’s own language assists in the difficult task of homemaking in a land of an unfamiliar language. It can thus be a means of recognising one’s distinctiveness in a multi-ethnic society, at the same time as establishing and maintaining rapport with one’s own community.25

25 A further indication of either closeness to, or separation from, Vietnam is clear in Vietnamese names. Vietnamese family names signify various Vietnamese historical epochs. There are very few Vietnamese family names but they almost all link people to the past, and to Vietnamese history. Almost all the most common family names are the name of the rulers of dynasties – such as Trieu, Ly, Ngo, Dinh, Le, Tran, Ho, Nguyen. Other common family names are Pham, Hoang, Bui, Dang, Vu, Truong. Historically, as political circumstances changed people changed their names (Nguyen Long et al, 1994: 343-4). Given names are usually chosen because they are the words for positive personal characteristics or qualities, reflect ambitions, are a thing of beauty in the natural world, a religious symbol, or related to the astrological calendar. Examples are: Manh ‘strong’, Duc ‘virtue’, Thu ‘Autumn’ Thieu ‘prosperity’, and Dao ‘peach blossom’. In Australia, Vietnamese people often change their given names to names that are more easy for English speakers to pronounce. Sometimes children will deliberately change their names to English names, in order both to be more acceptable to non-Vietnamese, and to distance themselves from their Vietnamese background. What people choose to call themselves in Australia can therefore be a name that is either inscribed with historical associations with Vietnam, or is a marker of the desire to accommodate Australian ways.
Interiors and exteriors

In the Australian homes of Vietnamese people, from the interior rooms to the verandah and garden there is frequently a desire to enable a continuation in Vietnamese styles of dwelling. Again, the house is pivotal in rendering autonomy to Vietnamese migrants and is often the focus of intense concern and interest. Huy told me of his feelings about his house,

*When I first arrived here there were very few other Vietnamese people. I just tried to concentrate on learning the new culture and trying to forget the old. But now I know that I can never forget. It’s many years now that I have been here, twelve years, and yet, I still love to hear the sound of chickens and roosters in the back garden. So that’s why so many Vietnamese people keep chickens. I grow bamboo and marigolds, as well as some herbs for Vietnamese cooking, like mint, ginger, and coriander. It makes me feel much more at home to have these foods and plants around me. A lot of my friends also like to have a vegetable garden and grow things that give them a memory of Vietnam. I have a plan at the moment to have a fishpond. That is very Vietnamese. These houses in Australia are so different from Vietnam, the size and shape of them is all wrong for Vietnamese people. So, we make the gardens more like home and change little things inside to make it easier for us, like putting in a shrine for our ancestors and putting more tables and chairs near the kitchen for making food. I can’t think of a single Vietnamese person who has not put a little bit of Vietnam into their home. No, I can’t.*

As Huy relates, it is common to see the gardens of Vietnamese-Australians planted with herbs used in cooking Vietnamese food such as ginger, coriander, Vietnamese basil, mint, lemon grass, as well as chilli bushes and sugarcane. Fruit trees such as lemon, grapefruit and banana are also frequently planted. Perhaps the most popular plant, however, is bamboo which in Vietnam shields most villages and family land around houses in the countryside. The bamboo hedges in Vietnam were ‘inviable boundaries’ but not only had a protective role as they were also used for building repairs and as a screen against the elements (Nguyen Khac Tung, 1993:13). Chickens are frequently kept and ceramic pots are often placed at the front of doorsteps. The two most popular flowers are marigolds and cherry blossom (*hoa dao*), which is important at Tet. It is not only the visual cues that are important reminders of another place but also the smells and the sounds. A rooster’s morning
call is yearned for by many Vietnamese. The smell of incense burning, and of rice cooking, are other ever-present reminders of places and people.

There are numerous aspects of Australian housing that restrict Vietnamese people from controlling their domestic space in the way that they may wish. The size of the average Australian suburban house means that it is unable to accommodate a large number of people, a common complaint for many Vietnamese families. In many cases one large extended family, or several families, live together under one roof. The following comment on Vietnamese housing is written by a Vietnamese-Australian in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, and indicates the gulf between rural housing in Vietnam and suburban Australian housing. The way that the house is described is indicative of the knowledge that each family member has of their ‘place’ within the family.

When talking about a house they rarely use the word ‘bedroom’ because, firstly, bedrooms are not the most important part of a Vietnamese house, and secondly, the ‘bedroom’ implies an unacceptable ‘individualism’ which is strange to the majority of Vietnamese people because internal walls of the house contradict family wholeness and group feeling. A Vietnamese house in the country is normally divided into six partitions: the front left, the back left, the front right, the back right, the front middle and the back middle. The back right is used as a sleeping place for grandparents whereas the back left is reserved for the parents or the couple. The family altar is located at the back middle partition; thus this part is the most important part of the house. The front middle part is considered the second most important area in the house and is only used to receive guests. This part was considered so sacred that female family members could not sit or pass through this place (females were considered ‘unclean’ because they menstruated). The front right part and front left part are used at night as bedrooms for single boys and girls respectively’ (Nguyen Xuan Thu, 1990:32).

So although everyone in a rural Vietnamese home would understand their place within the home, that place could never be entirely theirs as there was a deep concern to maintain the family’s integrity as a unified whole, and to avoid the claiming of private space within the home. While the interconnections and familial ties are emphasised in the allocation and use of space within Vietnamese houses, the
separation and independence of family members is apparent in the spatial layout of Australian houses.

Clearly, the design of the average Australian house is inappropriate to most Vietnamese families because of the way that space is apportioned as well as because of the fixed definitions of each room regarding their function. Most Vietnamese share beds with several family members and are not accustomed to sleeping alone. In more crowded living conditions of Vietnam there are commonly three generations living together in the everyday life of the family. Sleeping several families together in an Australian three-bedroom dwelling is not considered difficult, but rather is viewed as something expected. However, Vietnamese people often find it difficult to accustom themselves to the difference between the size, shape, layout and the use of rooms in Australian houses and that in Vietnamese houses.

In Vietnam it is not uncommon for kitchen spaces to take up a much larger space than they do in Australian houses, and often outside areas are used for preparing food and cooking (Do, 1994:3). It was also usual for kitchens in rural areas to be in an outhouse to prevent fires and smoke from penetrating the main house (Nguyen Khac Tung, 1993:20). The relatively small kitchens in Australian houses pose problems for extended families or even two families living in the same house, as usually several people will be involved in preparing and cooking food at the same time. Regulations as well as the high costs involved in renovation in Australia also make it difficult for people to change existing structures. In Vietnam it is not uncommon, particularly in the countryside, to erect new rooms onto houses as the need arises. Temporary structures to house visitors, or lean-tos against houses to accommodate enlarging families, although not strictly legal, are very rarely policed.

In Australia, changing the physical structure of a house can be very complicated and may involve the participation of numerous authorities. Changing the physical layout to be more suitable to the extended nature of Vietnamese families are not the only changes that Vietnamese people like to make. It is also important to have an

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26 Pader (1993), in her study of the uses of domestic spaces in Mexico and the United States, outlines a similar contrast between the social worlds of the house in the two countries. She aptly identifies the style of spatial utilisation within houses in Mexico as ‘familism’ and that in the United States as ‘individualism’. These socially constructed values respectively emphasise either ‘interdependence’ or ‘individuality’ (p.117).

27 I thank Jose Do, an architecture student with a knowledge of Vietnam, for stimulating many of the following ideas in the discussion of comparative house design.
appropriate place to put an altar for ancestor worship and to create a kitchen space that reflects their usual mode of food preparation. The standard three-bedroom house also creates problems for many families who meld work and homelife together as small businesses are frequently run from home.

The design of Australian houses still remains constrained by a 'normative' concept of an Australian house which specifies a limited array of designs, sizes, materials and layouts. Houses that deviate from these specifications are uncommon in spite of the variety of architectural forms that would be possible, the prior experience that many migrant Australians have with contrasting styles of living, and the ethic of cultural diversity. Australian houses have usually been built within areas in which roads have determined the position and number of houses (Do, 1994: 6). New housing developments thus also constrain the spatial formations of suburban housing as roads, and defined shopping and school locations play a determining role.

Many Vietnamese-Australians have the wish to change the layout of houses but are impeded by the cost as well as by the unyielding and durable nature of the materials, and the defined and unalterable usage of every room. They are also confronted by the limited and constrained styles of most Australian housing. Many Vietnamese people mention the unsettling effects of the homogeneity and regularity of Australian housing and suburb layout which often signifies to them their own lack of conformity, the mismatch between their desires for autonomy and choice and wish for inclusion and acceptance. Their inability to determine the form of housing and neighbourhood may engender feelings of isolation and disempowerment. Most rooms have a pre-determined role which is difficult to alter. Permanent furniture in-built into houses as well as fixed appliances (such as ovens and stoves) and specific accommodation for machines (such as washing machines and refrigerators) may also restrict the ability of some Vietnamese to make a claim on spaces as their own. For example, the position and size of bedrooms does not enable them to be used for other purposes such as for eating and food preparation or for entertaining guests. Likewise, the fixedness and immobile nature of the components of Australian kitchens (such as in benchtops and cupboards) may make meal preparation awkward for some Vietnamese people. In Vietnam, it is common for meals to be prepared and cooked outside and at ground level. Women not only wash food but also chop it on a wooden block. Rice is set to cook on low fires also from a
The typical Australian kitchen often makes cooking less satisfying for Vietnamese families as it is more difficult to share the work with others, and is often physically uncomfortable.

Likewise backyards are not freely open to others and are seen as private space. Ideas about the body are also incorporated into the arrangement of toilets, bathrooms and laundries within houses. In rural areas of Vietnam a toilet is commonly a plank of wood positioned over a river or a pit. These are much more open and accessible than Australian toilets which frequently have lockable doors. Even in urban areas of Vietnam toilets may have screens of hanging material rather than doors. Likewise washing of the body is usually confined to a closed Australian bathroom. In Vietnam washing the body may take place in numerous locations: in public bathing houses, in rivers, on pavements, or in the bathrooms of private houses. It is not uncommon to see people washing their hair while squatting down on a public pavement. The expectation of physical privacy and seclusion is thus emphasised in the design of Australian bathrooms and toilets. In Australian houses, laundries are separate rooms, not easily entered by guests. That clothes are kept in closed cupboards or drawers, washed away from view and hung to dry in backyards is indicative of the sense that clothes are not expected to be seen except when they are being worn. This contrasts to the presence of clothes in public view in Vietnam. Clothes are most usually washed beside rivers, in courtyards or on pavements where there is running water. They are also hung to dry in shared space. That bodily waste as well as clothing must be kept secluded from public view in Australian homes exemplifies the expectation that bodies will be separated from each other. By contrast, in Vietnam, the more open exposure to bodily excretions, washing of the body, and clothing, in the familial and neighbourhood spaces reveals the different significations of public and private space. Clearly, attitudes towards the body are vividly portrayed in the spaces of the house as well as in the use of outside space. There is thus a confluence between bodily dispositions, social relations, and the uses of domestic spaces.

28 Newer houses in Vietnamese cities now often incorporate kitchens that enable people to stand while cooking. Rice cookers and other electrical appliances are also now more readily available.

29 Pader (1993) outlines a similar contrast between the Mexican and U.S. uses of domestic space. She writes that, in U.S. homes, ‘... activities related to the body are hidden away in carefully closing rooms, with as few family members as possible allocated to each bedroom and bathroom’ (p. 125).
Houses in Vietnam often have a free flow of movement between inside and outside and very often, in rural areas, have no doors. The flow of activities between interior and exterior spaces is made easier by the large openings as well as by the amenable spaces adjacent to these openings. The outdoor spaces are frequently enclosed courtyards which are especially convenient and safe for young children. In Australia, this type of movement, flowing in and out, is made more difficult by the usually defined doors and large areas of backyard, which frequently lack intimacy and seclusion. Space in front of the main entrance to most Australian houses is not utilised as private space as it is most commonly near the road and open to the public view. Many Vietnamese people therefore find Australian houses more confining, with their smaller exterior doors, which are frequently locked to the outside. Most Vietnamese families at a celebration such as Tet may have a large gathering of people in one house. It is at such times that they often feel themselves more enclosed and limited within the average Australian house. Verandahs in Australian houses are viewed by Vietnamese families as very appealing as they are seen as transitions between the outside and the inside and may fulfil the changing needs of families for added spaces at various moments. Do (1994:3) has pointed out that most Vietnamese houses have more extensive indoor spaces because they are fewer walls and barriers between different parts of the house. Wooden bed bases also serve a myriad of roles and are used as workbenches, for food preparation, for dining, and for sitting (Hickey, 1964:237). Nhun’s family lived in a village in the north before 1954 when they moved to the South. She describes a wedding in her village.30

We had to have a lot of visitors staying with us because the groom was a relative of my father’s. They all came from other villages and from Hanoi to help prepare days before the wedding. Our house suddenly expanded. A big extension was built on that would stretch the side of the house out to have two more rooms - my father built it in a day with the help of his brother. The kitchen was also made bigger so all the women could help to make food. The walls inside the house were moved about and one of the outside walls was removed to make the kitchen bigger.

The limitations of Australian houses for enabling such rapid changes in function and size do not allow for flexibility in entertaining guests. Rooms tend to be categorised as fulfilling certain roles and most furniture has only one function. A circumscribed

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‘living area’ thus becomes the predominant area for entertaining guests. Vietnamese people view houses as deeply connected to social relationships. This inseparable link means that houses are never divorced from their social meanings. Clearly, in this view, the value accorded sleeping areas is minimal compared with the areas which can be shared more readily with others. Houses in Vietnam accommodate this communal style of living. Likewise, houses in Australia which allow for a flexible and congenial space for family gatherings are seen as the most satisfying form of housing. Nhun continued,

In many cases families would not have a table to eat from but would use the flat wooden base of a bed which had the sleeping mats rolled up. They would sit on this base and have the food on a tray in the middle or they would sit on a straw mat on the floor.31

In contrast, the relatively fixed definitions of living, dining, sleeping and cooking spaces of the typical Australian house appear to be inappropriate to communal living styles. The ability to close off rooms with doors, particularly in bedrooms, imposes seclusion and privacy upon family members. Vietnamese houses traditionally do not have fixed internal walls. When Nhun had a party for Tet in her house in Sydney, she put a huge plastic sheet all over the floor and made it into a table at ground level. It extended along the hallways and to the edges of the large rooms. Food and drinks were placed all over the plastic and the guests spread out around the walls. Nhun’s piece of plastic is one of many creative ways of replicating the spaces of Vietnamese houses in Australia.

Perhaps the main contrast between Vietnamese and Australian houses is that Vietnamese houses are designed to make social activities and communication more accessible and less constrained. In Vietnam it is common to see people squatting or sitting in doorways, or under awnings, watching people pass by, and chatting with people they know who may cross their path. It is understandable that many Vietnamese people find the isolation and privacy of Australian houses difficult for most are accustomed to the frequent contact with many people flowing in and out through their houses or in the courtyard areas. In many Vietnamese homes I visited in Australia the television was on throughout the day. When I asked about this, most people told me that the noise reminded them of Vietnam, adding almost as an aside that it helped their English. It is very common for people in Vietnam to sit and talk together on pavements or in courtyards, in a market place, by river banks, or in

31Hickey (1964:237) confirms this usage for bed bases.
a neighbour's house. Partly because of a lack of refrigeration and partly as a social activity, women in Vietnam usually take a daily walk to the market, buying fresh foods, chatting, or sharing what they have grown with a neighbour or relative. By contrast, in Australia, most Vietnamese people do not shop every day because of the home refrigeration and storage, the inconvenience of travel and because outings often do not provide social encounters. Unless living in an area where there are many Vietnamese shops, the opportunities to speak Vietnamese may be limited.

Even if a street has many Vietnamese people living in it, the closed and private nature of the dwellings often means that there are fewer everyday experiences of social contact and connection with other Vietnamese-speaking people. In Vietnam, many residences double as places of work, either shops, repair places, tailors, restaurants etc. and therefore, for older people, just being at home was enough to ensure an abundance of social engagement. In Australia this arrangement rarely occurs, and even visiting people may be a problem because the low density of detached dwellings, unfamiliarity with public transport, and low English proficiency together may make urban travelling difficult. Although the coming and going of people in houses appears to more fluid than for most non-Vietnamese, in general older Vietnamese people commonly experience extreme loneliness and social isolation in Australia.

The homes of most Vietnamese in Australia also reveal the complex ways in which spaces are gendered. Women’s externality is one of a locus of assumptions that underlie conceptualisations of the Vietnamese family (see Chapter 10). The social occupations of women in Vietnam have changed throughout history. Their actions often revolved around the home, hence they are frequently referred to as ‘Ministers of the Interior’ (noi tuong) (Mai & Le, 1978:67). However, they also were involved in business life, trading and operating as street vendors. Nevertheless, men usually had control of property and dominated political life. Because of patrilineal descent, only men could inherit their parent’s property. The control of space by men was particularly noticeable in the communal village house, the dinh, which was primarily the domain of male social, religious and political participation.

Although most women born since the 1950s in Vietnam actively engage in public life in Australia as they do in Vietnam, there remains an image of women as custodians of language and ‘traditional’ culture, and of being yoked to domestic
spaces32. This is particularly the case for older Vietnamese women who commonly speak little English and have a limited source of income. Wrenched from familiar surrounds, many resort to staying at home almost all the time. Interspersed with stories of bereavement is an unfulfilled yearning for a lost and irreclaimable homeland. This unease can be seen in relation to their struggle within a culture which many feel denies them any public acknowledgement of their difference.

Discussion

Social beings engage with the world through time and space. Because they are embodied, social beings are always ‘somewhere’ but there are enormously complex ways in which our physical location in time and space is tied to other moments and places. For Vietnamese-Australians, home is a concept interlinked with a homeland, a language and a social world, all refracted through the experience of loss. They may experience the here and the now only through the past in another country, Vietnam. Social space is embedded in a consciousness of space that may be both metaphoric and physical, as suggested by the spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre (1991:27). By showing how the experience of other times and spaces have become enmeshed with the everyday experience of Vietnamese people living in Australian cities it has been revealed that a home’s place in the world may have resonances with spaces in the imagination. Recollections from past spaces may imbue the houses of Vietnamese-Australians with links and attachments to people and places.

This chapter has indicated ways in which Vietnamese people make their places in the Australian world and, in a polarisation of attitudes, are rejecting and resisting forms of marginalisation and negative representations at the same time as they are participating in and accommodating those assessments and views. Resonances between home-making in Australia and Vietnam also reveal modes of exclusion and silencing occurring in the domestic environment. The house and home have taken on the mythic symbolism of refuge and safety in the diaspora and strategies to infuse Australian homes with a sense of Vietnam often accelerate feelings of security. The concept of home is inexorably linked to identity, to the ways in which

32 In Vietnam as well as in Australia, Vietnamese women are highly aware of the expectation on them alone to maintain tradition. In Vietnam, for example, some women complain that there is only a traditional costume for women (the ao dai), and not for men (Marr, 1996:39).
the narratives of personal journeys are imprecated into space. The home, for Vietnamese in Australia, has thus become part of the struggle to make a place within both a fractured relationship to the real or imagined homeland, and within the wider society.

Diasporas by their nature link global politics, history and places with the local. The local refers not just to an immediate regional environment but to personal, and everyday experience. The house is a fundamental conceptual and tangible cultural nucleus for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space and the conjunctions between the global and the local. The personal histories of many Vietnamese-Australians tell of interminable movement, and of loss of homes, repeatedly associated with family breakdown and profound social change within Vietnam prior to their departure. The transplanting of lives from Vietnam and the loss of a cultural-spatial Vietnamese world has resulted in a reinscribing of Vietnamese cultural life on Australian places.
Chapter Three

Relationships in Space

Attachment and detachment in Vietnamese families

Many copies of the photo of Tuan, a fourteen year old boy, lay on Nhungh’s dining room table. Tuan’s sad, shy face stared out at the camera. Tuan had disappeared from his parent’s home a week before this. Nhungh had been asked by her friend, Binh to distribute these as widely as possible for people to find Binh’s missing son. The family was to undergo further tragedy when, two weeks later, one of their daughters went missing at the age of seventeen. Both children were found in different types of shared housing some weeks after their disappearance, but refused to return home, both saying that their parents were too strict, and that life at home had become unbearable. Over the next year both of them followed the path of many young Vietnamese, moving from place to place, sometimes staying for a few months, sometimes for a few weeks, sometimes at the house of a friend’s parents, sometimes at a distant relative, and sometimes in group housing with other young people in a similar situation. Binh’s daughter is presently living with a Cambodian teenager who has also left his family. Both Binh’s children are yet to reunite with their parents.

Nhungh described to me the family situation that had led to Tuan and his sister’s disappearance, and in doing so revealed much about the expectations placed on young people to remain in the family home. She told me,

I don’t think that family was more strict than many others that I know. The parents wanted their children to behave in the Vietnamese way towards their parents and to older people in general. Children are not meant to express an opinion, they are meant to just always do what they are told. When Vietnamese children see how other Australian children behave, they feel that their lives are harder, that their parents are unfair and too hard on them. In that family punishment was quite severe I thought. The children were not allowed to go out for weeks on end if they did something wrong, and they were always doing something their father didn’t like, not something you would consider bad, just things like playing at a friend’s house for too long after school. Not only do
Vietnamese children here have to be good at school and be successful in Australia because their parents cannot be, they also have to be quiet, even to serve and look after their parents and older people, and they are never allowed to complain. As well as that, children are kept children until they are really rather old, they can't do anything independently, or have thoughts of their own. In a way parents have to control their children’s minds, have to know everything that goes on. Those children in that family were always individuals and they couldn’t stand the Vietnamese ways, particularly as their father was so severe and I think, quite inflexible.

Nhung was saying what had been told to me by many already, that the different expectations of parents born in Vietnam and children brought up in Australia was a cause of enormous stress within families. The house may be a haven and a refuge for many Vietnamese but for some it is the site of conflict and despair.

Although there is a continuing and pervasive influence of family and community among Vietnamese-Australians, fragmentation is also increasingly common. The following pages examine the way in which the dispersion of families and generational discontinuities are often couched in spatial terms. I will also here inquire into the notion that the manner in which family relationships are scripted spatially highlights the way in which transformations and ruptures in social life become spatialised. This is particularly so for migrants who must deal with separation and loss of social ties because of distance from their homeland. In the case of Vietnamese migrants, not only is the relationship to one’s parents the formative site of fission and union, but so is the relationship to Vietnam itself, to which the Vietnamese family is intimately linked.

**Relationship to homeland**

The relationship that people have with Vietnam is primarily experienced through family relationships. When asked to name what is important to them about Vietnamese cultural life, most Vietnamese-Australians mention family life. Other features of Vietnamese cultural life, such as language or love of the homeland are

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33 The differing views of the home, as benign or conflictual, is examined by Sibley (1995: 93-100).
considered secondary to the importance of family. Older Vietnamese often accuse youth of ‘losing their roots’\textsuperscript{34} (\textit{mat goc}), which has a sense of losing one’s family, one’s home, and one’s country. A desire to maintain Vietnamese identity in Australia is often centred upon getting the family together in one location. Almost all of the first refugees to Australia from Vietnam left some of their family behind. Others spend a lot of their time being concerned for their family in Vietnam, or in arranging for family members to migrate here. Some use all of their personal savings and borrowings for this purpose or for returning to Vietnam to see relatives. Others who have relatives who have died in Vietnam cannot forget those people who may enter their dreams and thoughts on a regular basis. Often, Buddhists, on the anniversaries of a relative’s death, may have a special meal and remember that person, who is believed to still be present. The death of relatives in Vietnam can continue to affect family members in Australia even though they often do not continue the death anniversary ceremonies once they have migrated.

Nghi, a thirty-eight year old who was in the military in South Vietnam prior to 1975, has been in Australia for ten years. He told me that for the first eight years after his arrival he had dreamt of his younger brother he had left behind in Vietnam. These dreams were always highly emotional and moving. He used to wonder why his brother never wrote to him but his parents in Vietnam always reassured him that his brother was fine and that he was just too busy to write. However when he returned to Vietnam after eight years in Australia, his parents told him that his brother had died in a bus accident just after Nghi had left Vietnam, but had not wanted to tell Nghi because they felt the sadness might ruin his chance of success in Australia. As soon as he knew of his brother’s death, Nghi stopped dreaming about him. He said that this was because his brother’s soul has stopped wandering in its efforts to tell Nghi that he had died. The ghost of Nghi’s dead brother was put to rest only through a return trip to Vietnam. Likewise, when an older Vietnamese person dies in Australia, it may have been their wish to have their ashes returned to Vietnam. If this is the case, the relatives may take a trip back to their home village in Vietnam to bury the ashes. This strong relationship between the living and the dead is also linked to the relationship between the aged and the young, the young always needing to show respect to the old, as the living do to the dead. Quyen, a 45 year old Vietnamese woman, remembered the presence of dead ancestors in her childhood household,

\textsuperscript{34} This expression is also commonly used in Vietnam (see Marr, 1996:5).
When we were all together as a family for certain events and anniversaries through the year, we would worship our ancestors and offer them food and drink. There was a feeling that we had invited them all back into the house with us, and we had a sense of going back in our family history a long time, all the dead ancestors and all those still alive were together.

It was on these occasions that the household and the village were reinforced as the sites for a family’s genealogy.

The historical and social influences of Confucianism in Vietnam have facilitated a significant emphasis on the worship of ancestors. In Vietnam, following one of the predominant religions at the same time as practicing ancestor worship is not viewed as problematic and most followers of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism as well as Christianity have shrines to their ancestors. Many do not see ancestor worship as a religion, but rather view it as related to their family and village traditions and social life. Many Vietnamese people in Australia have a continuing relationship with their deceased relatives, through ancestor worship and death anniversary ceremonies. Many believe that these ancestors share the displacement of their migrant descendants, or that they are omnipresent. Although the pervasive nature of ancestral spirits allows individuals to feel connected to them in the diaspora, many believe that the preferred location of ancestors is in their homeland. Having a sense of communion with ancestors while away from Vietnam does, however, facilitate an adjustment to foreign places, by connecting people through time and space to their ancestors. People often worship ancestors to request blessing and approval for their actions as well as to appeal for support. The cooperation from ancestors in the praxis of the living and in the hopes for future descendants signifies the unions that operate spatially and temporally between Vietnamese people across the world. These affinities are able to modulate the sense of loss of the homeland and, in many cases, they intensify the association between those present and those absent.

There is often guilt associated with having not fulfilled one’s obligations to ancestors, particularly if there has been some ambivalence about leaving Vietnam, which is often the case. One man I met felt very sad about not having said goodbye.

\[35\] That ancestor worship is not viewed by Vietnamese as a religion is indicated in the figures from the Australian 1986 census. Here, the majority of Vietnamese, when asked to state their religion and given the choice of major world religions, mark ‘No religion’, rather than ‘Other’. The question was not asked in the 1991 census.
to his father before escaping from Vietnam, because after a year of being unable to contact his family from a refugee camp, he discovered his father had died two days before his own successful escape. He sought out a Buddhist group who follow the charismatic leader Ching Hai, in order to appease the family’s ancestors for his unfilial behaviour and to undo and to repay the debt. The local practitioner of this religious group, sensing the man’s need to redeem himself, asked him to help in making repairs to the houses of fellow Vietnamese. By providing assistance to the needy this man was able to atone for the feelings of loss associated with separation from family, death of his father, and distance from Vietnam.

In Vietnamese families children are expected to behave well and assist others. These good deeds have the effect of preventing the wrath of ancestors rather than in directly benefiting the children in the present. The ancestors are believed to ‘remember’ these good deeds for the future generations, and because of the morally righteous actions that preceded their lives, will expect to have an ancestral life without undue suffering. This means that people not only think of their past ancestors but also dwell upon the effects of their praxis upon future generations. Children are taught that behaving well towards ancestors will benefit not themselves, but their children and future generations. So, for many Vietnamese within the diaspora, the thought of their children’s new life, and their future in Australia often carries with it a need to make amends to ancestors in Vietnam for possible unfilial behaviour in the past, creating a sense of continuity between the actions of people in the past in Vietnam, ancestors, and the future generations in Australia.

**Vietnamese families in Australia**

The family, for many Vietnamese people, is thought of as a tangible place, a home linked to the ancestors’ past deeds as well as being the site of their burial. The house is also the central site for teaching children and for taking care of aged relatives. When individual family members are ill or aged, the others in the family have the responsibility to feed them and look after them. Where in Australia there is often a reliance on government and business to provide support and assistance to the individual, among the Vietnamese this is ideally provided by the family and
community. In Vietnam, the family is viewed as a system of welfare and mutual dependence, through which every member must contribute in order to gain assistance when necessary. In their last years, aged parents often need material support as well as the company of the younger members of the family. Their children and grandchildren have a duty to act towards their parents with what a Vietnamese-Australian, Nguyen Xuan Thu (1990:34) describes as ‘total loyalty of heart and with great devotion’. Divorce in Vietnam is still unusual, and divorced people are often marginalised in contemporary Vietnamese society. In the past, even if a couple were extremely unhappy in a marriage, both families would try to repair the bond. The bonds of marriage were traditionally cemented by societal norms which expressed the undesirability of marriage breakdown, and the importance of providing grandchildren. It is not only marriage but the entire family which should be kept together. As Huy told me,

We never thought a family could live apart. Our life would have no meaning without being in a family and contributing to it. We would be nothing if we didn’t have any family.

One of the pre-eminent ideals of the Vietnamese family is the concept of hoa thuan, or ‘harmony and unity in relations’. These harmonious social interactions are the basis of the family’s moral code which relates to the way in which each individual suppresses independent desires in order to maintain a co-operative and unified family (ibid). The value of agreement and solidarity provides for many a sense of security, yet for others, whether here or in Vietnam, family life is marked by a sense of constraint and onerous obligation. The pressure upon individuals within a family to promote and protect congenial coexistence often depends on a strict hierarchy within the family, a system of inequitable power relations often replicated throughout society, forming a key element of Vietnamese cultural life.

Family stability, the leitmotif of Vietnamese cultural life, is attained most often through keeping family members together in one location. Most Vietnamese people feel that the disintegration of many families in Australia is partly to do with the entire social environment of Australia, the fault most evidently lying with an environment and a mode of existence which are not always favourable to a family

36 The paradox in this word is evident if one analyses the components. Hoa ‘conciliation’ is the ideal behaviour of husbands and thuan ‘obliging consent’ is expected of wives. Marr (1976:388) points out that the women’s role in this compound meaning was secondary and passive, while the male role was active and initiatory. Harmony in this conception thus depended on differential roles within the family, not just between men and women, but also between older and younger members.
life as known in Vietnam. Huong, a woman in her forties with both parents as well as her sisters, brothers and children in Australia commented,

>You can see the change in us all here. My sisters all talk about making money, and being free, and if anything goes wrong in their marriage they say, ‘I can always get a divorce’.

This was unthinkable in Vietnam.

It is thought that urban living favours fragmentation and dispersion, and that Western culture promotes individualism and affluence and reduces the need for interdependence. The fact that the structure and strength of the traditional family are being eroded is well known and worth re-emphasising. What is less well known is that the family and familial ties may come to be perceived as a liability and a factor which creates new stresses for individual refugees.

Dependency upon parents and other older relatives is strongly encouraged in many families and this reliance is expressed in the crucial role that parents play in providing solutions to the problems of their children. This is graphically illustrated by a new trend – a number of people are now leaving their marriage partners in order to return to Vietnam to live with their parents. Several people have told me that they see parents as irreplaceable, unlike marriage partners. This thus leads to difficulties in marriages, when parents’ advice can be more highly regarded than the spouse’s. It also means that children growing up in Australia see marriage differently from their parents. This can strain parent-child relationships in Australia. When family ties remain important it is sibling ties, as well as parent-child ties, that can be more valued than the partners’ relationship in marriage. Many Vietnamese children grow up in Australia with the expectation that their primary relationship will be with their marital partner rather than their parents or other family members. This becomes awkward when parents attempt to ‘interfere’ in the marriage. Sometimes it puts great strain on the entire extended family. Long’s sister Kim Anh, for example, was criticised by both Long and their parents for preferring to follow the advice of her husband rather than theirs, and spending too much time with her husband’s family. This led to a distancing in the relationship with her parents. Her parents gradually developed a greater reliance upon Long and his brother Dinh for their needs, and inevitably it was Long and Dinh that they chose to live with. The difficulty between Kim Anh and her parents was reflected in her choice of a house in a suburb well away from her parents’ and brothers’ house.
The family seems to be the central 'place' where all sense of belonging is developed and adapted. In the case of Vietnamese street gangs the lack of family is the prime motivation for joining such gangs – many were unaccompanied minors to Australia, or have left unhappy homes. The experience of being separated from family is common and dictates much of the way in which individuals relate to wider society. Being without family makes them feel 'out of place' and distant from the everyday experience of people around them. What 'family' actually means to Vietnamese Australians is varied. One teenager told me he would feel half dead without his ancestors but that it doesn't matter geographically where he or his ancestors are. Many feel more free to worship ancestors here in Australia than they did in Vietnam (because the political situation in Vietnam has meant that any religious practice is not a respected activity). Others feel that their mother is the most important family member. It seems though, that however the actual central kin relationship is constituted it is a very important gauge to other relationships outside the family. As Michael Jackson argues, '...one's incipient sense of space lies in the to and fro movement between attachment and loss, separation and reunion, distance and nearness, and that one's relationship to a house or to a landscape is informed by the primordial structures of one's relationship with the parent's body' (Jackson, 1995:121). The physical relationship to one's parents thus unfolds into the relations with one's environs. For example, Mai, a 23 year old woman, was put on a boat by her parents when she was ten so that she could have a better life than they expected she would have in Vietnam. She did not see her parents again until she was twenty years old but her father remained to her a powerful and important figure during the period of separation. Back in Vietnam she had had a difficult relationship with him and was always questioning his authority and fighting his strongly held beliefs about how girls should behave. She believes that being in Australia enhanced her ability to stand up for her rights (her expression) and thus enhanced her rebellious relationship to her family. More than this she says that even in working relationships in Australia she thinks of her father and rebelling against him when someone tells her what to do or complains about her work. Her relationship with her father enters her everyday experience at many levels. This pattern I have seen repeated with many Vietnamese people here and I believe that having been forced into leaving one's family back in Vietnam (the experience of almost every Vietnamese in Australia) has allowed Vietnamese people to deeply question their central kin relationships and what it means in their lives, at the same time as they often reproduce those relationships with others in their social world.
To some degree other relationships have often had to replace the usual kin relationships because of separation. For example, two men who are high up in the hierarchy of the Vietnamese Community Organisation say that they became involved in the organisation because they were separated from their wives in Vietnam. They both told me that rather than have other relationships with women they 'got married' to the community organisation. It is therefore the parent-child relationship and later the husband-wife relationship that may be the basis for a model of relationships in the wider world for Vietnamese. The five often-quoted Confucian values of humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faithfulness are often called upon to provide many with codes for conduct, especially relating to their immediate kin. Even individual success, such as academic achievement or financial success are often viewed only as useful for the benefit and pride of the family as a shared achievement. Individuals who do succeed often also feel obliged to remember the input from other family members in creating the environment for that achievement. There is also pressure upon a successful person to use their success to assist others in the family, to share wealth, and to offer advice to younger relatives. These normative prescriptions for familial relations are often at odds with personal independence, and thus create many tensions and frictions within migrated Vietnamese families.

As mentioned earlier, where family ties remain important it is sibling ties that can take precedence over other kin relationships. Sibling ties are often as important as parental ties, but this may be partly an artifact of diaspora life where parents are often not present. Siblings frequently start businesses together and very often share accommodation even after marriage. There is extensive mutual co-operation between siblings and relationships with sisters- and brothers-in-law are frequently a source of argument in marriages. Networks of friendships seem to replace, or be added to, those of kinship to a large degree, as part of the migration process. Friendships are often extremely close. Huy and his wife Hoa, for example, had a group of ten friends (five couples), all in their twenties, who went out together every week, usually to each other's houses. They frequently stayed over at each other's houses, and some of the group are planning to go into a business together\(^{37}\). Calling in to see people in their homes comprises the main activity related to friendship networks. Relationships between friends and family are constituted and deepened by the free flow of movement between houses. These

\(^{37}\)This type of friendship network has also been noted in the Canadian Vietnamese community in Quebec (see Dorais, Pilon-Le, Nguyen Huy, 1987:37).
visits are often very frequent, sometimes even daily, and usually include sharing cooking and meals and may involve staying overnight. For many people visiting other Vietnamese family members or friends is the principle evening and weekend activity and is usually preferred over other possible activities such as going out to a restaurant or to a movie. Here, the home again embodies and encompasses the intimate social world of a Vietnamese family. To be invited into this cherished space is to be welcomed into the ties of kin and close attachment.

It is not very common for people to have more than a few non-Vietnamese friends. Friendships with non-Vietnamese tend to be with those people who have helped them out like sponsors or first employers. The long term residents are an exception to this. When a Vietnamese person arrives in Australia, they will immediately trace any relatives they may have. Family relationships are often tenuous or just friends of the family. Next to kinship, friends constitute a very significant social relation. Close friends are not numerous but are considered as near brothers and sisters (friendship almost always involves people of the same sex only). They may be asked for anything, although sometimes these requests are resented. Friendships that do replace unavailable kin relationships are in many cases the cause of friction for people, as at some level they are perceived as being more fragile and less able to deal with hardship. These friendships will therefore often centre upon visiting and talking, and less frequently upon lending money or finding jobs for each other. Friendships primarily provide comfort and support. The most noticeable difference between friendships and family relations is in the physical proximity. Once a friend moves into a house with another Vietnamese person, in most cases this allows them closer emotional intimacy, and they are treated more like family. The connection between sharing a roof and sharing family ties is thus further cemented.

The two most important stages in life for examining the changing relations to the home in Vietnamese diaspora families are youth and old age. I will discuss both of these groups in the following pages.
The place of the young

When speaking of her family, Nga frequently mentioned feeling bound together as a unit, and of having difficulty thinking of ever leaving the family home. In the time I knew her she had to make the decision to leave in order to live closer to her place of study. Her family were so distressed about her move that they were unable to visit her in her rented apartment for many months because of being so overwhelmed by emotions. She herself had trouble speaking about the move without crying. A young person’s necessary departure from home is often viewed as breaking up the entire family unit. Young women, in particular, are strongly discouraged from leaving the family home.

Nga’s attachment to her family and her difficulty in leaving home is in contrast to another young woman, Thu. When I met Thu she was sixteen years old and insisted that she spoke no Vietnamese and hated Vietnamese food because she had left Vietnam when she was so young. She even commented that she was not sure if her country of birth was Vietnam or Hong Kong. She had run away from home one year earlier. When I later met her family they informed me that she was fluent in Vietnamese and named her favourite Vietnamese foods, cha gio and buon. Thu had been so resentful of the inequalities in her family and the lack of power of children that she could bear it no longer and had escaped. Along with her escape from her family was a denial of a Vietnamese past or any aspects of a Vietnamese self. This may also have been partly due to her feelings that Vietnamese people are not valued in Australian society. When I met Thu again when she was eighteen, she had forgotten that she had told me that she didn’t know whether she was born in Vietnam, could name the province where she was born, and even recalled for me the story of her family’s escape. This new-found connection to Vietnam coincided with an improvement in the relationship with her family. Although she never lived with them again, she frequently made telephone contact with her mother and her sisters. For Thu, the separation from her family was also a separation from Vietnam. Likewise, a reconnection to family members coincided with a reclaiming of her Vietnamese identity.

It is not uncommon for Vietnam-born youth to deny their Vietnamese heritage but it is rare for children with only one Vietnamese parent to claim any connection to Vietnam at all. Some will completely avoid any mention of their background. One 16 year old boy, Peter, who had a Vietnamese mother and an Anglo-Australian
father, felt shame and anger whenever discussion turned to his Vietnamese background. When he had to appear in court for shoplifting offences, he told me that he put a colour rinse through his hair and opened his eyes wide when on the stand so that he would not be thought of as Vietnamese. He would only allow his father to come to the court. Although it seemed he had a much closer relationship to his mother than to his father, his mother complained to me that he never allowed her to pick him up from any events, and never brought friends home unless she was not going to be at home. His mother wanted to throw him out of the house after he was first caught by police. The boy’s shame at having a Vietnamese mother was manifest in not allowing her to enter the public spaces with him. For both Thu and Peter, the movement between Vietnamese and Australian cultural worlds is thus often an actual movement from one place to another, and from one family shape to another.

While some youth wish to claim no connection to a Vietnamese ethnic identity, others attempt to reclaim it. Uyen, a 22 year old university student, who had left Vietnam when she was 8 years old with her mother and younger brother, was very keen to maintain her Vietnamese identity. Her father had been in the South Vietnamese Army and had been killed in action. She told me that she would only marry a Vietnamese, and that her mother would be very disappointed if she married a non-Vietnamese. She said,

*My mother still talks about my father a lot, and would never marry anyone else, even though my father died when I was still a baby. I think she wants me to marry someone like my dad, then there could be a man in the family again. But he would definitely have to be Vietnamese.*

The desire to marry someone Vietnamese like her dead father was not only to satisfy her mother’s loss. Uyen also wished her future husband to come and live with her at her mother’s house after marriage. In Vietnam, although residence is usually patrilocal, if there are no adult males in the wife’s family, a new husband might come to live with his wife’s family. While for many Vietnamese-Australian families there has been an increasing trend to move to a house separate from one’s parents after marriage, many still follow the patrilocal norm. The reshaping of Vietnamese family life in Australia has meant that the physically close families are viewed as closer to Vietnam. Likewise, the distance of family members for most people also signifies the separation from Vietnam and the accommodation of Australian values. Uyen’s desire, not only to marry a Vietnamese man but also to take him into her
mother's home, was a confirmation of her Vietnamese identity at the same time as a tribute to the memory of her dead Vietnamese father.

Like Uyen, many young people are deeply affected by their relationship to Vietnam but feel confused about which ethical norms they should be pursuing. Van, a community worker in Cabramatta, received a monthly letter from his father in Vietnam. These letters always caused Van to have feelings of depression and anxiety. Van had left his home in Vietnam when he was twelve with an uncle, but his parents had decided to stay on as his mother was too ill to travel. Van felt the need to take care of his father after his mother died, but his father's requests were never able to be met. Van's father had recently asked for $10,000 to build a new house in Vietnam and Van did not have the money. Van said,

*It would be much easier if he could only agree to come here, because then he could live with me in my house, but as it is now I have to support him in a separate house in Vietnam.*

This separation of families is therefore seen as a financial burden as well as emotionally difficult.

Huy once asked me why the English expression 'filial piety' was so rarely used because one of the most important familial norms and verbal expressions observed by Vietnamese people is *dao hieu*, translated as 'filial piety'. When I explained to Huy that there was no equivalent everyday expression in English, he could not understand how English-speakers could not have a common word that, for him, outlined the basic requirements of the moral code of all children towards their parents. Children who are compliant and submit to their parent's wishes are rewarded and defiance is dealt with harshly, and punished frequently. Children devoted and dedicated to their parents and older kin are called upon to protect family honour and to be an exemplar of their family's righteousness. It is significant that if there is disharmony in the family, children will often not even confront their parents. Rather than insulting their parents verbally, they will often just leave the family home or stay out for long periods, away from the house.

Children frequently appeal for parent's advice. Parents are consulted over every major decision or asked to resolve problems even after children have grown up and
left home or married\textsuperscript{38}. Self-reliance and arriving at decisions independently are strongly discouraged. Huy told me,

\begin{quote}
In Australia it is often seen as somehow typical that at adolescence children will rebel. We never rebelled in Vietnam. We would have felt really guilty and ashamed, and no one would have supported us. We depended so much on our parents. They provided us with everything, and we couldn’t make a decision without their opinion being taken into account. We were taught repeatedly to do everything to make our parents’ lives happy.
\end{quote}

Children are often thought to be irresponsible at making decisions and are often told that they do not have the maturity required to solve problems. Parents are thought to be wiser, and to have the experience needed to disentangle the most complex dilemmas. Economic independence is also not encouraged and parents therefore may reinforce control over children by the continuing reliance of children upon them for financial support. These conceptions of adult/child relationships are viewed by Vietnamese families as being in opposition to the social trend in Australia in which dependence is condemned and children empowered to become independent and to make informed decisions themselves.

Not all young Vietnamese people are attracted to the ways of Australian youth and many feel concerned about their lack of family members in Australia. Many would like to ask the advice of an older relative but may not have any in Australia. They feel unsupported and alone. If they have spent their early childhood in Vietnam they often have not learnt strategies for solving problems and arriving at independent decisions and so find it difficult when they are not in a situation where older people control their movements or guide their decision-making. At the same time youth in Vietnam was always seen as a special period in one’s life, a period of rejoicing which unfolds through life in continuous reminiscences. Attached to the preoccupation with the vitality and experimentation of youth is the idea that eventually one must submit to parental pressures\textsuperscript{39}. Not only did children in Vietnam often willingly follow their parents’ wishes but in other ways were also tied to their parents. Frequently, in Vietnam a son would help his father in his

\textsuperscript{38} Marr (1996) mentions that in Vietnam, for example, columns in the press often encourage letters from readers on emotional problems, but the ‘Answers often assumed that the family of the letter writer, and perhaps the family of the other party to the relationship, should be involved in solving problems, not only the two individuals involved’ (ibid:11).

\textsuperscript{39} Marr (1996:2) describes this same phenomenon in relation to contemporary Vietnamese youth in Vietnam.
work, learn his trade or occupation, such as farming, fixing bicycles, or making pots, and then take over the father’s work as the father grew older. As there is no formal training in Vietnam for tradespeople, at least one son would necessarily do the work that his father does. The roles of parents were much more multi-faceted in Vietnam. In Australia, for Vietnamese families, the future career of children is usually not determined by their parents, and there is usually no expectation that children will take on the same occupation as their parents. This is perceived as being because of greater choice in careers and the impact of the expectations of the wider society that individuals be independent in decision-making.

The primacy of parents in the Vietnamese family also means that intergenerational differences are cited constantly by my informants as the key problem area in diaspora life. The difficulties in families tend to arise when expectations of behaviour by children are broken. This is exemplified by the following response from Quyen, when asked if anything surprised her when she came to Australia,

*Just a few weeks after I arrived I was at the house of a friend of my family and I saw my friend’s teenage daughter shout at her mother. You can’t imagine how I felt. It was humiliating to watch and I felt ashamed for my friend. I didn’t know then that it would be only a few years before my own son was shouting at me. This is a great shock for Vietnamese. In Australia there is no respect for family or older people. I am just glad my parents back in Vietnam have not had to experience this.*

Parents, often shocked at the ‘un-Vietnamese’ behaviour of their children will frequently impose greater control on the movements of their children, such as confining them to their bedroom, or not allowing them to go out. Parental control of the movements of young people are apparent in many homes. In Vietnamese families, if a child is obedient they are told that they will be more successful in life than those that don’t listen to their parents. This idea is expressed in the following Vietnamese proverb, ‘The fish which is not preserved with salt will be rotten, The child who disobeys his parents will be spoilt’ (Nguyen Xuan Thu, 1988:21). Many old people still remember by heart poems and proverbs that outline ideal behaviour. As well as wanting to be successful, many Vietnamese children obey their parents in order for their parents to be pleased and happy with them. This means that children will not talk of their difficulties at school to their parents for fear of disappointing them. The repute of a family to a large degree rests upon children’s behaviour therefore one of the most extreme insults to a family is to accuse their
children of lacking parental respect (do bat hieu). Filial piety can assist the honour of a family and ensure that suffering will not come to future generations. The burden upon children to influence not only the experiences of their parents in life, but also in the afterlife, encourages children to succumb to parental will. The expectation that a child may even enhance the possibilities of others' lives in the future also fosters altruistic actions.

As an indication of the manner in which social relations are seen in terms of location, the following pivotal Vietnamese proverb reveals that a child's behaviour is determined to a large extent by where they are placed. One of the central proverbs for the behaviour of children is expressed in social location, Cha me dat dau ngoi day, sit where your parents place you. This means not only that children should sit in the house where parents tell them, but they should marry who parents choose, and in other ways behave the way that parents define. The importance of didactic poems cannot be underestimated for older Vietnamese and many young Vietnamese complain about their endless repetition.

Disciplining children is often mentioned when talk turns to family. A well known Vietnamese proverb that I have had quoted to me on many occasions is Thuong con cho roi cho vot, ghet con cho ngot cho bui – 'to love a child one is strict, to hate a child one says sweet words'. I have seen many parents being exceptionally firm with their adult children as well as with their younger children. It is not uncommon to see lists of rules hanging up in a child’s bedroom. Parents often impose a very strict routine of work and study on their children. There are didactic poems in Vietnamese that are still recited to give moral lessons to the young. The strict discipline of children has the purpose of engendering respect and deference to the elderly and to parents, self-control and restraint, selflessness, responsibility and consideration for others, and academic excellence. Harmonious relationships within the family but also with friends and colleagues is also advocated. This co-operation and unity is coded into the expected behaviours of family members within domestic space. The sharing of activities in the house mirrors the shared space itself. Family members and often close relatives who are visitors will co-operatively cook, clean and work in the home. Children’s homework is usually done at the kitchen table and the rest of the family frequently becomes involved in this activity. The expectation of a unified family involved in an everyday praxis of interaction is frequently transformed in the process of migration and the incorporation of families into different housing and a different social environment.
Vietnamese youth frequently find themselves in a position where their use of space is a means of empowerment, countering these traditions. In the domestic realm children may spend more time alone in their rooms in order to define their sense of separation from Vietnamese family life, as an act of defiance against behaviour that is expected of them, or in an attempt to replicate what they see as independent behaviour of their non-Vietnamese peers. One 15 year old boy, Sam, distressed his family enormously by eating meals in his bedroom away from the family. His father at first refused to allow food to be given to Sam if he did not eat at the family table, but this only strengthened the resolve of Sam who decided not to eat at all. Finally, his parents agreed that he could eat alone in his room, but this gave them great anguish and mealtimes with the rest of the family were no longer pleasurable. Sam’s story indicates the way in which the use of domestic space in Vietnamese-Australian homes may reveal disjunctures between normative Vietnamese values and transformations that have occurred. Bedrooms are seen as the most private realm of the house and are used by adolescents to signal independent behaviour and separation from their parents.

For Vietnamese parents, young men and women are not meant to be in close proximity. Older relatives particularly discourage young women from being in the company of young men. In Vietnam, it was easier to control youth because the physical and social environment was more known. Their parents want them to stay at home more and not to go out alone, wanting to know exactly where their children are at all times. The movements of children out of the house into public spaces are controlled by parents not only as a punishment for bad behaviour but also because public street life in Australia is thought to be dangerous and threatening. Girls are expected to be chaperoned by older relatives if they go out. Parents also advise their sons to go out in groups but this often causes a problem with the police who are wary of groups of young Vietnamese males. Very few young people want to openly talk about their suffering, preferring to be silent, and very often they will use their movements in and out of the home to express their feelings.

40 Marr (1996:5) shows the remarkable similarity between the situation for Vietnamese-Australians and those in Vietnam. He writes, ‘Rather than argue with his father, a young man is far more likely to stay away from home, to borrow money from friends, to drink, and to slip quietly in and out of the house when parents are otherwise occupied... A young woman cannot just come and go from home like young men, but must convince her parents she is safeguarded by siblings, female friends or her fiance’ (ibid).
Making themselves unable to be found is a common form of reaction by some young people to the dilemmas of bridging two cultural worlds. At school they may play truant and miss classes, and at home go out frequently without telling their parents where they are. Later, after leaving school some may run away from home. Long before this they are also often disappearing for days on end from their parents’ homes. An 18 year old Vietnamese girl, Angela, had run away from her parents when she was fifteen. She had had boyfriends in gangs and had experimented with drugs. When I first met her, she had not visited her parents for two years but was intending to do so soon. When I asked her about her parents she told me.

_They were so strict when I was at home, it was just irrational. They wanted to know every movement of mine. When I was fourteen, I couldn’t even walk home from school by myself and talk to my friends. I had a big fight with my parents when they said I wasn’t allowed to see my boyfriend anymore, except at home with them there in the house watching everything. So I left straight after that. I know how they would feel about this. They would want to disown me, because I have embarrassed them in front of their friends and the rest of the family. They would say that it was my fault, that I had become too Australian. But I really feel that not seeing my mother and my father for so long is a sort of punishment to them. Hopefully they will be better towards my younger sisters and brother._

The idea that running away from home is an act of revenge upon strict parents is not uncommon, for most children are aware that being out of the home and away from constraints upon their movements is painful to their parents.

A child’s abandonment of the parental home is felt as an irrecoverable loss. In Angela’s case, the home was also used as the site of another form of revenge when, several years before I met her, she suggested to a member of a Vietnamese gang that they use her parent’s home for a ‘home invasion’. It is significant that when violence against Vietnamese people occurs in urban Australia, the most common site is in people’s homes. Usually several young people will enter the home of someone known to be carrying money and threaten the inhabitants with violence if they do not part with the cash. Although other violent episodes are gang violence, armed robberies and vandalism, the ‘home invasions’ are what terrify the majority of families the most. For Angela, the knowledge that her friends were entering her
family's home to wreak havoc was an attempt to further shatter the sense of
sanctuary that her parents had associated with homelife.

The fusion and integration of two worlds of cultural meaning is frequently required
of Vietnamese youth whereas there is little expectation upon older migrants to
synthesize the numerous views of their own background with the dominant culture.
Vietnamese youth are continually appraised and evaluated within media
representations for both their triumphs and their transgressions (see Chapter 6).
They thus are able to carry multiple significations. Their academic achievements
may be seen as the incarnation of the benevolence of the wider society in permitting
refugees to settle and to flourish. At the same time, the images of young Vietnamese
boys selling drugs on Cabramatta streets create apprehension by representing the
personification of a contaminated and desecrated society in which fears of national
and global evil converge to present an image of the fragility of our social fabric. For
example, a report in the Age newspaper on 10th August, 1992 outlined the findings
of an internal Victorian police report on Vietnamese gangs. The article stated that
police had,

'...warned that drug-related murders, armed robberies and aggravated
burglaries committed in Melbourne by Vietnamese gangs will continue
to rise because of economic and social pressures. Unemployment and a
ruthless attitude to survival are among the main reasons for the potential
for crime to grow. While the Vietnamese gangs lack organisation, they
pose great dangers due to their ease of mobility and transient nature,
their random selection of targets, their lack of ties and ability to enact
extreme violence upon their victims' (p. 1, my emphasis).

Not only do Vietnamese people themselves report the lack of control of the
movements of young Vietnamese to be a danger to be avoided, but mainstream
society also views Vietnamese youth, especially young males, as being particularly
fearful. Examine, for example, the following report in the Herald (Sun, 19 June,
1991:3),

Vietnamese students armed with machetes, wheel braces and baseball
bats planned to attack a group of Croatian students at a suburban high
school, a court was told. The magistrate said the community owed a
debt of thanks to an alert teacher who contacted police before any
violence erupted. Melbourne Magistrates' Court heard the potentially
deadly ethnic confrontation was sparked by a Vietnamese student at
Baybrook’s Chisholm College being attacked by Croatian students. The
Magistrate said the actions of the five Vietnamese youths were spurred by a misguided loyalty to their friend..... (my emphasis).

In this report the use of the expression ‘potentially deadly confrontation’ is conjecture, and the description of a friendship as ‘misguided’ is indicative of the fear instilled by relationships between Vietnamese youth. While carrying weapons such as those mentioned is frightening, the reporter writes that no violence had erupted. The only violence that had taken place was by a Croatian student yet the article focuses almost entirely on the Vietnamese youths. In later chapters I will further elucidate the manner in which young Vietnamese males are perceived as being threatening when in public spaces.

**Older people and distance**

In Vietnam, not only are older people respected for their greater knowledge and experience but they are also revered because of their relationship to the ancestors. Through life one is believed not only to become more wise but also to become closer to the ancestors. In effect this understanding places older people in the respected position of being the bond between generations and between the spiritual world of ancestors and the material world of the present. This location between the sacred and the profane also accords them the role of merging and consolidating the different family members into a unified and harmonious entity. At the same time the elderly are viewed as being linked to the historical legacy of the country. Their stories and life histories blend together with the past people and events that are associated with monuments, buildings, graves and landscape. In Australia this link is broken and the ancestral connections are eroded but the Vietnamese elderly continue to play an anchoring role in families and in communities. A Vietnamese-Australian man writes that, without the presence of older people, the family is thought to ‘lack a lighthouse; its unity and its moral foundation will shake, if not break down...’. (Nguyen Xuan Thu, 1990:34). Most families feel the necessity to have an older person living with them in Australia, as their proximity is essential for the relationship to remain meaningful. A lot of the influence of grandparents is due to their proximity. Traditionally in Vietnam, after marriage a person would usually live in the same house until they died. The attachment of older people to their villages in Vietnam is therefore often apparent. In the past, it was common in
Vietnam for old people who had earlier moved to the city for work or to be near their children, to return to their native villages to live out their remaining years, and eventually to be buried there.

For most Vietnamese there is a stark contrast between negative images of the aged in Australian society which sees older people as suffering illness, being non-productive, lacking in knowledge, and burdensome - and the positive images of the aged in Vietnamese society - in which older people hold positions of power or are close to that power, are perceived as having knowledge, are close to revered ancestors, and who hold families together and can be turned to for advice. The old people’s home is the most extreme expression of western decadence and decay to most Vietnamese families, and is seen as a symptom of the gradual distancing of the aged from their homes that has occurred in Australia. This separation from any significant role in the home also occurs in Vietnamese families, not only in Australia but also in Vietnam. Often, as families have significantly altered their activities and values after settling in Australia, many older Vietnamese are left to fend for themselves, often being used as childminders and as bearers of culture for grandchildren who may have become too Australian for their parents liking. In Marrickville, I attended a daytime English session for older Vietnamese, and noticed the vehemence with which many of them criticised their adult children. It was clear that many felt isolated and needed the companionship of their peers for support. One woman told me that her most difficult experience in Australia was to feel immobile and inert, incapable of taking herself anywhere without her children or grandchildren to speak for her. She told me that this inertia had led to a lack of motivation to go out and it was only after a year in Australia that she had developed the desire and the skills needed to feel comfortable using public transport. In other instances, paradoxically, closeness, not distance, creates problems. Irritation, humiliation and anger often arise in the elderly who live with their children. They are most sensitive to any real or imagined spurning or sign of disrespect and feel offended and rejected at the slightest suspicion that they are being viewed as a burden. It is therefore clear that the way in which aged Vietnamese experience the space of home as well as the urban spaces of Australia is indicative of the wider changes within the Vietnamese migrant family.

There are also cases where an older relative may be abandoned or asked to leave the home of their children. In one family an older woman was living with her daughter, her daughter’s husband and their children. Her son-in-law argued with her
constantly because she gambled so heavily that she had lost all her money as well as some of the jewellery that she had brought from Vietnam. After gambling until late at night at one of the many pub/casinos in the Cabramatta area, she returned to find her remaining possessions outside the front door. She had been evicted from the house. After pleading with her daughter that she would cease gambling, she was permitted back inside. After this episode, the threat of being abandoned and left without a house stopped her gambling. In other families parents are threatened with eviction if they ‘interfere’ in the lives of their children or grandchildren. The perception that aged people may be a burden is a common change in attitude that has occurred, for most, only after migration.

Bich was in her seventies when she arrived in Australia, after her husband died in Vietnam. Her children had migrated ten years before her and she had never met her grandchildren when she arrived in Sydney. She says,

I felt as though the whole family were strangers to me. My grandchildren had to be forced to speak Vietnamese, and so often didn’t even want to speak to me at all. My own children had such independence that I was shocked. I had been told that this happens to all older people coming to Australia to meet up with their children. They usually find them disrespectful, and the behaviour of their grandchildren rude. After a while though I got used to the changes. I was so happy to be with my children again, that it didn’t really matter that so many things were different about them... I found that the hardest thing to cope with was that I wasn’t needed anymore. No-one asked me for advice and when I offered suggestions my children would often laugh and say, ‘Oh, you can’t do that here, Ma’. It is hard because I feel often useless. To cope with that I have had to become

Gambling is a common social problem among Vietnamese-Australians, causing much tension in families, and economic loss to individuals. The growth of casinos has made the negative social impact of gambling upon Asian-Australians more visible in media representations, with frequent reports of ‘Asian children’ being left in the carparks of casinos. Ironically, along with the legalisation of casinos, the recent trend to multicultural marketing has heightened the social problems associated with gambling. For example, one of the winners of the multicultural marketing awards was the NSW lotteries ‘Lucky Monkeys’ Instant Scratchies, which targeted Chinese and Vietnamese Australians during the Year of the Monkey in 1992. In Victoria, the huge Crown Casino markets itself to the Asian community, even providing a free bus from Chinatown, and it has significantly higher numbers of Asian-Australian ‘high rollers’ (large outlay gamblers) than would be representative of their population. However, in images of successful gamblers that the Crown Casino uses for its marketing campaigns, Asian faces are conspicuous by their absence.
like them, become more selfish and do a lot of things alone or with my friends who are my age. It is so different from Vietnam where we old people had a say, people listened to us, and we felt important.

Bich’s changed role within the family meant that unlike in Vietnam, she began going out more and more. She says,

*I was left so often at home alone that I was unhappy in that first year. I think because it was not my home. For the first time in my life I felt as if I was a visitor, allowed to stay out of kindness, or feeling pity for me. No-one visited me during the day and the streets were dead, and if I turned on the television, I was shocked at all the fighting on the television and didn’t really understand English then. So I began exploring around the streets and finally joined some groups of older Vietnamese people who meet regularly.*

In the home itself, old people who are confined to the domestic space are protected from changes and the stress of learning about Australian life but not entirely immune from it. Mainstream culture is brought into the home through their children and others entering the home, as well as on television. However, the most dramatic change to their known environment is the lack of power and control they have within their children’s homes. Their environment has been transformed from the known which they control to the unknown in which they are powerless. When Bich was confined to the domestic space, there is a sense in which Bich thought her home was invaded by mainstream values, a home that no longer felt like a sanctuary. In order to regain a sense of control she had to look beyond the home.

One of the much quoted norms of Vietnamese cultural life is *su kinh trong nguoi lon tuoi,* ‘respect for older people’. This norm reflects not only the important role that older people play in Vietnamese society, but also the relative difference in status between old and young. Respect of the elderly is a way of maintaining the hierarchy of relations within the family and acknowledging the contributions of guidance, wisdom and advice provided by older relatives. As a result of the differential higher status of older people, there is a flow on of relationships of respect to all relations between younger and older people, no matter what their position in society. When older Vietnamese people are not respected or are left to fend for themselves, this brings shame upon many Vietnamese. If older Vietnamese are seen appearing to be destitute in Australian public spaces, there is much embarrassment within the Vietnamese communities. In 1987, for example, the Nhan-Quyen Vietnamese language newspaper published a letter from a reader that told of several incidents of
older Vietnamese people begging on the streets of Springvale in Melbourne. The article refers to the reputation and honour of Vietnamese refugees and the author calls on the relatives of elderly Vietnamese who are begging to explain to them not to do this. In the case of real hardship, the author advises people to contact community workers (23 September, 1987, p.26). This suggests that public scenes of the poverty of the aged Vietnamese have the ability to shame the community. When begging by aged Vietnamese was reported in Nhan-Quyen in 1990 (20 December, p.15), the writer stated, ‘The story of Vietnamese aged begging for money in the street is too far-fetched to be true and might have been concocted by someone with the intention of undermining the family reunion scheme from Vietnam’, ‘that no Vietnamese would leave their parents destitute once they arrived in Australia under the family reunion scheme’ and that ‘the story can only be a rumour with some ulterior motive and the perpetrator should be revealed’. That the writer concludes that Vietnamese parents begging could only be untrue indicates the difficulty many Vietnamese have with accepting that any aged Vietnamese people would not be supported by others.

When aged parents are sponsored by families who have been in Australia for many years, problems often arise. In one family, a woman in her seventies had been sponsored to come to Australia after her three children had been living here with their spouses and children for over ten years. She went to live in Sydney with her daughter, her daughter’s husband and their three children. At first she was delighted to see her children again. Her other daughter and her son with their families came down from Brisbane to see her. She also met a few old people whom she had known in Saigon and she seemed very pleased to have come to Australia. However a month later when her two children from Brisbane had returned to their homes and her daughter was back at work after taking holidays to be with her, she became increasingly lonely. Her grandchildren were at school all day and were not interested in speaking with her in the evenings. They always spoke to each other in English, which she had never learnt. After six months she pleaded with her daughter to send her back to Vietnam as she felt isolated and alone in the house all day. She was too uncertain to use public transport and felt a burden to her family. She had to ask them to drive her everywhere she wanted to go and she stopped visiting any of her old friends. She had more and more fights with her daughter and her daughter’s husband who kept suggesting she go to Brisbane to be with her other children both of whom were reluctant to take her, saying that they did not have enough room in their houses for her. Exactly a year after her arrival in
Sydney, she took a walk from the house one morning after everyone had left for work and school. She was run over by a car and killed on a main road near the house. Whether this had been a suicide or not was hotly debated by friends of the family. What it showed, however, was the extreme difficulties that many older Vietnamese undergo when they migrate to Australia. It also revealed the extent to which a home cannot be separated from the wider social world it lay within, a concept which will be explored in later chapters.

**Discussion**

This chapter has revealed the manner in which the dispersal and fragmentation of families is manifested in spatial terms. Allegories of loss, escape from the past, and desire for a utopian future prevail in the accounts of people’s migration experience. For the majority of Vietnamese-Australians the family remains important, and family breakdown is uncommon. I here examined the manner in which family relationships are scripted in spatial terms, highlighting the way in which transformations in social life are also spatialised. This is particularly so for migrants who must deal with separation and loss in social ties because of distance. I have illustrated the manner in which the links that people have to their country have become tied to the relationship that people have with their family members. In doing so, I was able to examine the fragmentation of Vietnamese families in Australia in relation to the spatial distance between families and to the past in Vietnam. I was able to show how family members become enmeshed in either spatially distancing practices or spatially containing and controlling practices, depending on particular relations of power, both within the family and within wider communal life.

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42 Statistics on the cause of death of Vietnam-born Australians indicated that in 1984-86 (the only time period for which figures are available), the major causes of death were from accidents, poisoning and violence, and road vehicle accidents. Road accidents death rates were eight times the rate of the Australian-born population (Manderson, 1990:70). Although I have not seen any investigation of this death rate, it seems, from informants’ comments, that a large number of those killed by road accident are pedestrians. Most of the deaths of pedestrians are probably linked to the unfamiliarity that most newly-arrived Vietnamese have with Australian roads and the speed of cars on these roads. There are also quite a few road deaths that are suicides, although we may never know the exact figure.
Chapter 4

Urban space and difference

After having confronted locations in Australia that were, for them, lacking in meaning, Vietnamese people arriving in Australia from Vietnam have created a creolisation of space in Australian cities that has allowed them to construct a culturally meaningful landscape. The relationships that Vietnamese people have with the wider Australian society is inscribed upon the different spaces which they both move within and produce. Examining both the actual and the imagined spaces that are linked to the lives of Vietnamese people and the differing emplacements of Vietnamese people within our cities is a means to understanding how relations of power are mapped within our urban world. In this chapter I explore the nature of space within social relations. I reveal the manner in which the state and Vietnamese people themselves are embroiled within spatially dynamic practices. I also scrutinise the way in which marginality and resistance together pivot upon a spatial framework. I begin by examining the spaces of state control, from the immigration policies of successive governments which dictate what they consider to be the 'appropriate' ethnic and racial levels in Australian society, through to control on the use of personal and public spaces at the council or local government level.

This chapter also attempts to set the spatial dimension of social being in the domain of political struggle, examining spatiality in the arena defined by Foucault as arising 'from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat' (Foucault, 1980:149). The dislocation of lives from Vietnam to Sydney has meant that Vietnamese people have entered a new world of locational meaning in an urban hierarchy. Cabramatta is an area encoded with several layers of meaning. It is spatially peripheral and is thus marginalised in several dimensions, being coded as 'migrant', working class, and poor. Furthermore, it has developed a culture of resistance against the inner city, the centre, because being labelled 'Asian' also means being marginalised in the social structuring of the city and the labour market. In suburban areas Vietnamese people have frequently had to shield themselves from interference from the institutions of the state. Bureaucratic organisations impose guidelines and requirements upon the use of domestic and public space that are often viewed with wariness by migrants. Control over the Vietnamese engagement
in spatial worlds has been experienced through council building codes, public housing regulations, health and safety rules, and encounters with the police and the media. The private world of the home has enabled Vietnamese people to assert control over their spatial environment in the domestic sphere. Public spaces in western Sydney have become continually contested and transformed by the unfolding social diversity of the area. Vietnamese people have been able to make their presence manifest in the conspicuous incorporation of Vietnamese restaurants, sculptures, written language, and music within the public spaces of western Sydney (see Plates 11, 12 and 13). Informal and unregulated economies have flourished in the Vietnamese communities. While labour for these economies is often performed in the home, the businesses and shops frequently use the products of this labour. For example, food for Vietnamese restaurants, and clothing for retail outlets are often produced in people’s homes. The commercial areas thus provide a medium through which Vietnamese people may engage with each other at various levels, from their home as producers and suppliers of goods, as in-house staff, as clients or customers, and also as passers-by who may stop to talk in their own language with shopkeepers and restauranteurs. The formation of familiar social space is possible through a concentration of Vietnamese people and businesses in specific localised suburban areas. The creation of distinctive public spaces has allowed the Vietnamese minority to counter alienation and to resist political and economic domination from the majority at the same time as creating a site in which notions of an authentic Vietnamese identity are challenged and recreated.

Migrants and the state

When Vietnamese refugees started leaving their country in large numbers it was common for people to feel that once they arrived in another country, anywhere ‘within’ a state, they would be safe. Huy says,

*In Vietnam after the communists came in ‘75 we all felt that we had lost our country. We were there in the place, but it felt lost. When I came with my brother to the refugee camp in Thailand, the camp was like a no-man’s land, we were still stateless people, with no rights, no papers and no place of belonging. I was no longer belonging to Vietnam, and no longer belonging to any other country. I wanted just to be told I was allowed to come to Australia or America. Once I knew I would be accepted in, I had a home suddenly. I knew then that once I arrived, life*
Plate 11. Weekday, Freedom Plaza, Cabramatta

Plate 12. Shopfront, Cabramatta

The signs contain Vietnamese, Chinese and English words.
Plate 13. Herbalist, Cabramatta

Plate 14. Street market, Hanoi
would be safe and certain for us. The long months of waiting for acceptance made me so aware of the power of governments to say, it's okay, you can come into our country, we will accept you.

After a period of statelessness, being 'inside' the accepting country was of great significance to many refugees. The limited number of refugees that were accepted soon after 1975 showed that the state was determining 'acceptable' levels of refugee intake, which should be viewed in spatial as well as economic and social terms as it was not seen as acceptable to 'flood' the country with Vietnamese. The water metaphor was frequently used to describe refugees, who come in 'waves' or 'trickle' into the body politic, emphasising the faceless nature of refugeehood and the threat that they are to established frontiers (see Hitchcox, 1990:19). For example, in 1976 The Sun News Pictorial declared, 'There must be some way of clarifying how Australia is going to react to the coming invasion of its far north by hundreds, thousands and even tens of thousands of Asian refugees...today's trickle of unannounced visitors to our lonely northern coastline could well become a tide of human flotsam' (p.2).

Here, a state is metaphorically a container within definite physical boundaries, that can be flooded or swamped with too many of one 'type' and the refugee or the displaced person may transgress those boundaries, and in doing so may not have a right to a 'space' within that state43.

Appurdurai (1996) has suggested that diasporas 'expose and intensify .. the gap between the powers of the state to regulate borders, monitor dissent, distribute entitlements within a finite territory and the fiction of ethnic singularity on which most nations ultimately rely' (p.57). The anxiety produced by the presence of migrants has lead to ever-increasing measures of control upon immigration. As Pettman (1992:5) has argued, the government regulations surrounding immigration and citizenship operate to define acceptability at the same time as attempting to keep the 'foreign' out. When economic conditions are thought to be poor, if there is

43 Adrian Carton (1994) studied representations of Vietnamese women in the Australian press between 1976-1986. One of the key representations in the early part of that period was of Vietnamese people landing on the shores of Australia (often on the front page of newspapers). The photos usually presented women stepping on to the shore (see Figure). Carton says 'These women have crossed the body politic - but they have also crossed a more sensitive boundary in the Australian collective consciousness. In this sense, they have entered the Australian consciousness as outsiders in search of a home. This dramatic and disruptive image assumes the readers form a calm consensus which has been disrupted by this transgression of physical boundaries' (Carton, 1994:67).
perceived to be ruptures within, or conflict between ethnic communities, or social problems that can be attached to migrants. then there is often a determined effort to limit immigration (see Viviani, 1985:240). In July 1996 the Howard government significantly reduced the number of migrants in the family reunion category (Sydney Morning Herald, July 4, 1996:1). Increasingly immigration policies have disadvantaged Vietnamese migrants sponsoring their families to Australia. In 1991, the Department of Immigration announced that sponsors would have to provide bond money of $3,500 for the main applicant which has led to a reduction in the overall intake, and is considered by Vietnamese to be a surreptitious way to reduce the intake (See Viet-Luan, 10 Sept 1991:8-9). This meant that those spatially outside Australia but who want to reside here are frequently kept out if deemed unsuitable. One Australian immigration law unfairly discriminates against Vietnamese people because of the locations of Vietnamese families throughout the diaspora. This is the ‘balance of family’ test which requires parents to have an equal number of their children lawfully and permanently resident in Australia as overseas, or have more of their children resident in Australia than any other single country. Vietnamese, more than any other ethnic group, often have families that are spread over several countries.

The spatial ramifications of policies which define entitlement to citizenship are that the territorial boundaries of the country are defended against intrusion by those not accepted and that it is the state that determines the spatial ‘mix’, the number and type of immigrants permitted to enter the country in any one year. Not only is the intake of migrants restricted because of the perceived negative effects of further immigration upon the economy and the wider society, but new migrants are increasingly finding that they have a location defined for them. In July 1996, for example, the Howard government was attempting to introduce a policy which would force many new migrants to move to rural areas or forfeit a large bond payment (reported in all national dailies July 4, 1996). The monopolisation of space by the majority is linked, Sibley argues, to the ‘relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments’ (1995:iv). This policy also reflects the continued media emphasis on the association between Asian migrants and the decay and danger of our largest cities. The policy of forcing migrants to rural areas must be seen partly as an attempt to reduce their concentration in certain areas of our cities, and to visibly remove them from the gaze of the majority. A consequence of this policy would be the difficulty new migrants would have in forming connections with each other in their widespread rural locations.
Housing and spatial relations

Once in Australia the ‘guardians’ of Vietnamese spaces are almost always those that represent mainstream society. Many Vietnamese refugees were put in temporary refugee accommodation that consisted of policed hostels. After being allowed out to enter society, refugees most frequently seek government housing assistance. Once they decide to buy a house or a business, the council decides where and how they can build, or extend their houses. The power of the state to appropriate spaces lies in the realm of what de Certeau (1988) refers to as the ‘spatialising practices’ of the powerful where transgressive spatial behaviour may even be punished. Huy says,

*Even though I was so happy to arrive here. I felt as if at every moment the government controlled how and where I could live. I can move about freely but always within the housing determined by government regulations and always following the council rules.*

Huy discovered with a shock that the spatial freedoms of the West were chimera. Huy’s friend Minh had a similar experience. Soon after he moved into a government house, Minh received a visit from officials from the Department of Health, when a neighbour had reported that chickens wandered in and out of his house. Minh reported that the health officials told him that in Australia it is not ‘civilised’ to have chickens in the house, and that they were concerned about the health of the whole society. A more common story is that of Huy’s cousin, who, when he first arrived, shared his two-bedroom government flat with his extended family of eight others, none of whom initially had an income. Again, a report from neighbours to the housing office led to a visit from government officers claiming that that number of people in a small flat was ‘unsanitary’. The temptation of the state to impose and define what is healthy and correct, what is the ‘normal’ size of a family, can frequently feel extremely intrusive. It is also clear that there are different cultural conceptions of what constitutes ‘crowding’ and ‘privacy’. As described earlier, in Vietnam it is usual for three generations to live under one roof and for children, and adults of the same sex, to share a bed with each other. For Vietnamese in Australia, the available housing is restrictive as it does not cater for

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*In her study of discrimination against Mexican-American households in government housing policy, Pader (1994) similarly reveals patterns of state intrusion into the use of domestic space. This control is particularly noticeable in relation to the sleeping arrangements of Mexican-born migrants living in the United States. In Jalisco, Mexico, it is usual for three or more people to share a room or bed together. However, these arrangements are viewed as socially unhealthy by U.S. housing and community services.*
large extended families. In dominant discourse the nature of Australian housing is often held up as the ideal, while Vietnamese homes are seen as alien. When the first arrivals from Vietnam began to appear in newspaper articles these attitudes became clearcut. For example, as Carton (1974:67-70) revealed, in The Sun News-Pictorial (31 March, 1977), a smiling Vietnamese woman and her baby are shown with the caption, 'In Vietnam, Mrs. Truong Thi Thom and her family lived in a house of wood and bamboo. Now they're living in a solid three-bedroom brick flat in Nunawading's Eastbridge hostel.' Here, Vietnamese housing is equated with an unsophisticated and organic form while Australian house construction is seen to be more solid, reliable and inevitably more advanced (Carton, 1994:70). The feeling that Vietnamese people have that they are always within the spaces that the state appropriates, controls and defines leads to a sense of containment within and by the mainstream.

The sense of containment and control by the wider society is manifest also in the difficulty that many Vietnamese people find when wanting to rent an apartment or a house from a private owner who is not Vietnamese. Most find it extremely difficult, being rejected time and time again from rental properties. When Vietnamese people are successful in obtaining rental accommodation, they are often evicted some time after they move in. When groups of refugee youth have rented houses together, eviction is a common experience after the owner of the property discovers that there are more people living at the property than was specified on the lease. One family was asked to leave a rented apartment in Summer Hill because the neighbours complained to the owners of the smell of fish sauce (nuoc mam). The family felt that they could no longer use this essential ingredient in Vietnamese cooking until they owned their own house, which quickly became a priority. The sense of the Australian body politic being invaded by undesirable Vietnamese

45See Hall (1966) on cross-cultural comparisons of physical distance/closeness.
46It has been suggested to me by Philip Taylor that the comments of Vietnamese people about the hostility of landlords towards Vietnamese may be a polemical manoeuvre, a way of defining the non-Vietnamese world as unreceptive to their presence. However, I have personally witnessed two episodes of discrimination on the part of landlords, one in which a landlord did not return bond money after eviction of Vietnamese tenants because they found many things broken and had been asking the landlord to fix them. The money was never retrieved because the landlord claimed the tenants had 'destroyed' his apartment. Because the tenants had not accurately filled in the original bond forms by stating which items were in good or poor repair, they were unable to retrieve the money. This may have been a case where the landlord preyed upon people who had little English rather than because they were Vietnamese. However, in the other case the female landlord abused a Vietnamese family with anti-Vietnamese verbal insults when they came to see a house she had advertised.
practices was experienced by Vietnamese people as an attempt to control them and not allow for difference.

Urban environments

In Australia, urban planners have observed that in the development and planning of our cities there developed gradually the idea of an ideal housing type based on models from Britain and the United States but with its own Australian flavour (Watson & McGillivray, 1994:204). The Australian standard and ideal, the detached house with a large backyard on a substantial block, was founded upon the nuclear family with the social ideals of separation and privacy from others - 'the privatised suburban house, the privatised nuclear family, and egalitarianism based on homogeneity' (ibid:205). Recent critiques from urban planners and feminist scholars about the social limitations of the sprawling suburban form indicate that the combination of Australian housing styles and dispersed nature of suburban social life have led to social and physical detachment for many. The suburban areas spread over such a large area that public transportation is often inefficient and so those without cars, primarily women, new migrants and the elderly, face difficulties not only in finding employment but also in maintaining a social world outside the home. Many have become exiled in suburbs that often prevent them from engaging in the distant realms of influence and power (Watson, 1988). In spite of the large migrant population in Western Sydney, public spaces have changed very little over time47. The homogeneity of the suburban form can frequently be disorienting for Vietnamese. Many tell of being lost, or even of entering the wrong house in the first years in Australia, and of being terrified when they first travel on a bus because they may not recognise their destination stop. Huy tells,

_The first days of freedom in Sydney I looked up friends I knew in Vietnam and was taken to their houses, and was astonished at how similar they were. As time went on, I came to recognise different trees and shrubs, different colours that some front doors were painted and things like that. They all had cars that were different too. I remembered that in Vietnam it was whole neighbourhoods that I would know, where everyone in a street would recognise and greet each other. Often they were all relatives. There, I had to only recognise the people to_

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47Watson and McGillivray (1994) discuss in some detail the way in which multiculturalism seems to have had little influence upon suburban form.
know where I was – I could ignore the bricks and windows....When my wife came here, the hardest thing for her in getting around was not knowing English. She would depend on me to take her everywhere, because she was frightened of getting lost, not being able to read any signs and not being able to ask anyone for help. She felt it was a very lonely and frightening city.

The suburbs of Sydney were a hostile landscape for most Vietnamese when contrasted with the villages and urban neighbourhoods of Vietnam, and this physical hostility accentuated their own difference and separation. People often report an extreme fear for their physical safety when they first arrive in Australia, although this gradually reduced over time.

Nga was born in Vietnam and came to Australia when she was ten years old, in 1979. She says,

*I feel like a Vietnamese person living in Australia. My two younger brothers are so different. They were born in Australia, yet they are constantly reminded of their foreignness because they appear physically different. They don’t want to be Vietnamese, yet not a week goes by without someone asking, ‘Where are you from?’*

Nga’s comments reflects the common experience of Australians of Asian background who are always reminded of their difference. There is a constant necessity to explain how one arrived ‘here’ in this space. Ien Ang, a Chinese-Australian academic has described this experience thus, ‘As any migrant knows whenever she or he is asked the deceptively simple and innocent question...the compulsion to explain, the inevitable positioning of oneself as deviant vis-a-vis the taken-for-granted, remains’ (Ang, 1993:33, see also Chambers, 1994b:6). Nga told me,

*By asking the question ‘where are you from?’ Anglos are saying you are not part of this society, you can’t have been born here or even, you shouldn’t be from here.*

There is, therefore, a sense in which much of the urban world becomes hostile space for Vietnamese people, a space within which they continue to feel outsiders. Nga’s family was first sponsored to come to Yass, a country town near Canberra, where they were put on a farm, five minutes drive from the next house. It was in summer, and a drought. Nga tells,

*It was like landing on the moon, not even the same planet could look like this. I had only ever been in Vietnam in the Mekong Delta (a lush,
riverine environment) and in Thailand in the refugee camp. To arrive in Yass was shocking to us all. When we walked in the main streets of Yass, people really stared, they couldn't keep their eyes off us. My mother decided it was better not to go there, it made her feel too uncomfortable. So our sponsors brought us food for the first year, we were too frightened to leave the house. ... The smell of green mangoes haunted me the first few years. It was the clearest memory I had of Vietnam at that time. Now more has come back to me.

Not only was the physical environment of Yass alien but Nga's sense of isolation was made even more intense by the reactions of the townspeople to the sight of Asian faces.

This sense of being in hostile space is for some a continuity from the life in Vietnam. There were, for many Vietnamese people now living in Australia, places in Vietnam to fear and dread, areas of armed conflict during the American war in Vietnam, and in the post-1975 era, regions and places, such as New Economic Zones, prisons, and police stations, the type of terror-filled places Bachelard has called 'the spaces of hatred and combat' (Bachelard, 1969:xxxii). The sensations of being unwelcome and separate from the spaces they inhabit is thus familiar territory for many. When Nga spoke to me about her job which is to look after an autistic boy, David, she revealed how Vietnamese people experience marginality by saying,

I'm very patient with David. I think I understand what it is to be autistic better than Anglos do. Vietnamese people are like that, we're disabled in this society. People utterly ignore us or despise us. I notice that when other people are with David they don't even notice his presence - only sometimes, like when they feel that he is an irritant, that he shouldn't be in the same place as they are. He makes me so aware that Vietnamese people are treated like that. I think Anglos feel - 'Just keep out of our places – it's really okay if you all stay in Cabramatta, because we don't want you in our suburbs'.

The theme of the enclosure of Vietnamese within the broader society, of their being a subset and not really part of the whole society is present in many of the stories of Vietnamese people. In the Cabramatta shopping area, for example, although more than half of the shops are owned and managed by Asian-born people, the Chamber of Commerce, which has some input into decisions made by the local council and the police, is almost entirely Anglo-European. The Vietnamese shopowners are free to join the Chamber of Commerce but most feel they would prefer to run their
businesses independent of organisations, of which they have an inherent mistrust. They also feel that they are not welcomed by the other business-owners and so are reluctant to enter a hostile environment. At the same time they frequently have complaints about their lack of power in the bureaucratic decision-making process. One Vietnamese business-owner told me,

*All the Europeans who were here first hate us and they decide everything for us. They are always making it difficult to do what we want in our businesses, always saying we don't remove the garbage right, or telling us a new law we have to follow. We have no freedom at all because really they are the bosses.*

This enclosure metaphor frequently experienced by migrant sub-cultures also carries with it the notion of the ‘erasure’ of things Vietnamese by the mainstream.

Post second world war immigration has been a potent force in transmogrifying the face of Australian cities into new and different forms. However, the erasure of foreignness is often viewed positively in the wider society and, as a consequence, the ‘dangerous’ nature of large concentrations of refugees and migrants is a prevalent stereotype. A 1991 study of the spatial distribution and concentration of Indochinese-born Australians concluded ‘that there has been a gradual dispersal of the Indochinese communities since the beginning of the decade; several recommendations are offered that would assist this dispersal process’ (Coughlan, 1989; Abstract). The implication was that a large concentration of Indochinese people within communities was not a situation that one should promote and that ‘dispersal’ was to be favoured. The idea that a large number of Vietnamese people in one location may possibly be subversive or dangerous is taken up as a continuous theme in the reporting of Cabramatta in the press, as well as in academic debates. In March 1995, Australian academic and economist Helen Hughes, speaking at the National Immigration Outlook Conference warned that ‘ghettoes’ of non-English speaking immigrants were being created in Australian cities. She claimed that ‘it is very sad indeed to find suburbs in Sydney where it seems one is in a foreign country’ (March 1, *Australia Talks Back*, ABC Radio). The sense of anxiety associated with an Asian group in large numbers in one location mirrors the apprehension concerning the possibility of an Asian invasion in the post-second-world-war period. That concentrations of Vietnamese are connected with a loss of Australian identity is revealing, it is as if their emplacement here may erode Australian society, fragmenting it and removing the voices of other Australians.
The place of nature

The geographical position of Vietnam not only led to the profound impact of China on Vietnamese cultural life, but also meant a particular configuration of physical features and climate that has exposed the country to continuing natural disasters, particularly floods and typhoons. These natural catastrophes have been engraved on rural life in Vietnam where protective measures against the elements are passed on from generation to generation. Natural calamities are also manifest in legends, folktales, and village traditions. Memories of the storms, floods and harsh weather in Vietnam are often deeply affecting to Vietnamese in Australia. Stories are recounted about floods, particularly in central Vietnam, in which whole houses were carried away, and rice crops lost. When news of flooding in Vietnam is heard some families live in anxiety while waiting for news of their relatives left behind. Huy told me of his memories of bitter winters and muddied streets in the north which, he said, made poverty more unbearable. Little shrines all over Vietnam on streams or trees, or other natural phenomena, throughout the environment, all are indicative of the need of Vietnamese people to propitiate the spirits of those around them, in order that natural disasters may not to wreak havoc upon their lives. The ideal relationship between humans and their environment is thought to be a harmonious one, following the cosmological principles of Taoism. Throughout Vietnam, many people still believe that the benevolence and power of natural forms may be defiled with prominent buildings, tunnels, or railway lines which may violate natural features of the landscape. However, many also believe that there are benefits in transforming the environment in harmonious ways. Thus it may be possible to increase the vitality of a crop by creating a new rice-field in a certain location if it appears to be shaped as the earth is, in curves and non-uniform shapes. Not only is the natural world invested with religious meaning, but it is also a source of food and spiritual sustenance. Many Vietnamese people told me that although they found much of Australia physically appealing they could not relate to it in the same way as they did to the landscape in Vietnam. Quyen told me that the Vietnamese landscape was filled with people performing various activities, and that she was unable to find pleasure in the stillness, quietness and ‘emptiness’ of the Australian bush. She said,

>You just can’t go on a bushwalk in Vietnam. Every path you take has people carrying their produce, planting and cutting. And in Vietnam, if
we went for a walk in the country we always had a destination; a pagoda, or a temple, or some other ancient or religious place.

The Australian bush did not have either the historical or religious connotations that the Vietnamese landscape had. Vietnamese-Australians usually do not make many trips outside Australian cities to explore the landscape of Australia, preferring to travel to visit friends and relatives, or return to Vietnam for a visit.

Most Vietnamese-Australians have some experience of rural life in Vietnam and are aware of the contrast between Vietnam and Australia in attitudes towards catching animals and collecting plants for food. Where in Vietnam until recently one is free to fish the waters and hunt in the forests, in Australia regulations and controls do not permit such use of the natural environment. In the *Sunday Herald* (13 January, 1991:3), a report entitled ‘Fears of race tension over wildlife poaching’ stated that ‘The poaching of shellfish by Asian immigrants is inciting racial tension in Melbourne bayside suburbs...The Conservation Department is getting up to 20 complaints a day from bayside residents angered at what they see as the wholesale stripping of wildlife from reefs and rocks around Port Phillip Bay. According to Fisheries and Wildlife officers, 95% of the offenders are Asian and many of them are Vietnamese. The poachers are also reported to be becoming clandestine and prone to violence. Mussels, abalone, periwinkles and turbos are being poached. A spokesman for the Vietnamese community said the problem was one of education’ (my emphasis).

This account uses sensationalist language to convey the different attitude of Vietnamese people towards collecting fish as offensive, secretive and inciting violence. This very different use of public wildlife would clearly not be tolerated for very long. One older Vietnamese man told me that whenever he fished around Sydney harbour from rocks, he was almost always subjected to verbal abuse by other fishermen about emptying Sydney of fish and 'getting a free ride'. While others were seen as fishermen, he was viewed as a 'poacher'. This provides further evidence of the manner in which Vietnamese people are discouraged to use public spaces, their activities usually being seen as invasive and destructive. Present in press reports is the image of Vietnamese people as having transgressed both geographical and cultural boundaries.
Discussion

I have attempted to demonstrate how Vietnamese people in Australia have been incorporated into continually unfolding hierarchies of both marginalisation and resistance in urban areas. At the same time as participating in the transformation of suburban forms they have been subjected to powerful forms of exclusion. In areas like Cabramatta there is simultaneously novel expressions of diversity and state interventions upon 'different' utilisation of space. I have also examined exactly how the concentration of Vietnamese in a circumscribed and well defined location can represent empowerment and possibilities and when can it amount to the inverse; exclusion and powerlessness. Enclaves of Vietnamese migrants in western Sydney can thus signify both a cohesive community life that acts to counter mainstream animosity or they may denote a denial of choice and an abandonment to the city’s edges. There is evidence that both these aspects of high Vietnamese spatial concentration are at play. That on the one hand, shared culture, business opportunities and shared financial and family concerns are generated by a critical mass of people, but on the other hand high rates of unemployment and community tensions are sparked by the same phenomenon. Class, a pivotal social disjunction, has played a dominant role in shaping differentiation and movement out of Cabramatta. Clearly the changes in the significations of the components of urban space only become conspicuous across time and in diverse locations. The creation of distinctive spaces has allowed the Vietnamese minority to resist political and economic domination from the majority at the same time as permitting a contestation of Vietnamese identities.
Chapter 5

Estrangement in cities

As well as studying the wider engagement of Vietnamese lives with mainstream society, this chapter deals with the differing meanings attached to the spatial distribution of Vietnamese people in Australia’s urban areas.

Ghettoisation and marginalisation

The spatial isolation of migrants prevents access to information as well as creating a physical and conceptual barrier to social, economic and political incorporation. In an attempt to investigate where Vietnamese-Australians ‘dwell’ in the Australian consciousness, it is also necessary to examine how Vietnamese are represented spatially. In urban spatial structure, the dangerous and disruptive influences of Vietnamese in the spaces they inhabit are the paramount media representation. On the eve of Sydney’s Tet celebrations in 1995, the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, speaking about Cabramatta, declared, ‘No where else – not even King’s Cross - which Cabramatta eclipsed as drug capital of Australia – is the heroin trade carried on with such disdain for public sensitivities or police authority’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1995:1, my emphasis). Here, the ‘danger’ of Vietnamese is that they can ‘lure’ outsiders in, for disreputable activities. The public Vietnamese are used as a sign of urban pathology and gang crime is the ultimate disorder. The involvement of Vietnamese criminals with local council members or politicians challenges the controlling powers of the state, and implants fears about the effects of further migration.

For many, refugees signify the unpredictability of governing powers and the fragility of the world’s political and economic circumstances. Encounters with refugees also force us to confront circumstances that are beyond our immediate concerns and our national boundaries. Refugees may also evoke feelings of compassion for a people wrenched from their homeland, or fear of the unknown suffering that is carried by displaced people. As Nga told me,

*Somehow we remind people that there is danger and chaos in the world, we unsettle their feelings of security.*
Nga, a weaver, remembers that when there was an exhibition of her work at an Art School, many of the viewers had an extreme reaction to it. The work referred to her life in Vietnam, her journey on the boat to Australia, life in a refugee camp, and her difficulties in Australia.

*One woman told me that her fiance had died in Vietnam, and began crying while looking at the work. Later, when I wasn’t there at the exhibition, after it having been explained that the work was about being a refugee, several people told the curator that they didn’t think refugees should be let in to this country – one even told her that she thought it was wrong because Vietnamese people brought malaria here. And then there were the morbidly curious ones – the people that hung around me plying me with questions about the boat, whether or not my family had been imprisoned, and about life in a refugee camp. The work seemed to bring out really intense feelings in people.*

The unpredictable nature of the outflow of refugees from regions of turmoil contrasts with the image of migrants as having planned their departure and followed bureaucratic procedures. The arrival of refugees is always unexpected and cannot be prepared for, so those in receiving countries often respond with fears of being assailed\(^\text{48}\). Likewise, Nga’s experience highlights that Vietnamese migrants often feel that they are an intrusive and disruptive element in public spaces. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* (January 28, 1995:29) a report on the ST Vietnamese gang described as ‘ugly’ the presence of Vietnamese youth on the streets. The local newspaper, the *Fairfield Advocate* in response to publicity about street crime, frequently compels Vietnamese people to return to their extended families, and to the home, to family life – the core of Vietnamese existence. Here, Vietnamese people are thought to have an attachment to domestic spaces, to the spaces of family and community that should not impinge upon the cities public spaces, unless it is in an acceptable form, as ‘ethnic’ spectacle in street fairs, festivals, or restaurants.

In the reporting of gang crime in Cabramatta, it is frequently stated that ‘unaccompanied young refugee males are a dangerous source of criminality’

\(^{48}\) Some commentators (for example, Carter et. al., 1993) have noted that this sense of instability in mainstream society has already arisen partly from the disintegration of a coherent link between place and identity that has occurred because of massive population movements and globalisation. Both the presence of migrants and the effects of globalisation may accentuate the fragility of a spatial connection to place. Thus those who have stayed ‘at home’ may themselves feel alienated as the world they have known is besieged by the world beyond (ibid).
(Sydney Morning Herald, 7 September, 1994:13). John Newman even called for their deportation (ibid). Young Vietnamese males are viewed as socially uncontrolled and anarchic, a danger to others who they could tempt into immorality and illegitimacy. The presence of single males, in particular, constitute a danger to authority and through their participation in transgressive behaviour they are believed to increase crime and corrupt others. Media representations of young Asian males in Australian cities almost always represent them as being associated with drugs, disorder and delinquency (see Chapter 6). They are seen to flout the unspoken expectation that they will be subservient and are therefore viewed as ‘corrupting, yet corrupted by city life’ (Larbalestier, 1994:192). A familiar racist comment towards migrants is that ‘Australians’ are being displaced by Asians in their own country. A non-Vietnamese shopping centre manager in western Sydney told me that he was installing closed-circuit surveillance cameras in the centre in order, to evict groups of Asian boys because they give the place a bad appearance. The ‘unnatural’ and undesirable nature of a Vietnamese public presence in the Australian city is repeatedly reinforced by police and local and national media, but mostly in the everyday experiences of Vietnamese people who so often report their overwhelming sense of difference in public places.

The spaces of Vietnam

A brief foray into the use of space in Vietnam will be useful in the examination of the use of public and private spaces of Vietnamese people in Australia and into the transformations of habitus that occur in the process of displacement. Hanoi has a long and varied history which is reflected in the many architectural styles; Chinese, Vietnamese, French colonial and eastern bloc buildings dominate in the public buildings but are all also present in domestic architecture. Hanoi is extremely crowded and every square metre is filled with activity, particularly in the old sector; women in conical hats line every street selling their produce from baskets suspended on bamboo poles over their shoulders, everywhere people are eating noodle soup cooking in huge pots on the pavements and at every moment items are being transported; women carry heavy loads on or over their shoulder, cyclos (bicycles with a seat in front) carry people and building materials, beds, food, pigs and other produce and thousands of bicycles and motorbikes weave their way in and out of alleys and narrow paths, moving both people and merchandise (Plate 14). The recent interest and availability of foreign goods is visible and audible
everywhere in advertising signs, shops selling foreign consumer items, clothing, and rock music blasting from shops and cafes.

Space in Hanoi is so limited that many people live work cook and eat in just one small room. Mostly three generations live in this space and because this restricts utilisable space a lot of activities are performed on the street - washing clothes, washing dishes, cooking, working (fixing machines, sewing, homework), cleaning teeth, washing the body, watching television, and talking, playing and arguing (see Plates 15-17). The Australian house does not empathise with the traditional Vietnamese perception of public and private spaces. For example, the fences around most Australian houses clearly segregate one family’s house from the next. In Vietnam, this barrier seems much less apparent. In the case of a village, children are free to roam around, they may wander into neighbour’s houses freely, especially if the neighbours are kinfolk in which case they are welcomed as members of the family. As already mentioned, streetscapes are often places of social engagement with people talking and working openly, children playing and street vendors selling food to pedestrians. Very commonly the spaces on the street are utilised for producing food, and for building and repairing items. Many roads are used for such activities as children playing, drying rice paper, threshing rice on the road surface, repairing motorbikes, welding surfaces, and laying out lengths of bamboo for drying. Because of both the poor condition of road surfaces and the level of street activity, most vehicles in Vietnam travel very slowly. In Australia the situation is very different as streets are mostly for cars only, and are much more dangerous for pedestrians because of the speed that many vehicles travel. For many Vietnamese people, the streets in Australia lead to a further sense of alienation as streetscapes here are not places of social interaction and may even feel dangerous and threatening to those unfamiliar with them.

In Hanoi, usually the one or two rooms that most people occupy is open completely with a roll-down blind left open until very late at night (see Plate 18). This means that one can look into many people’s houses and see them at work or eating or sleeping, on every street in Hanoi. Sometimes that one living room doubles as a shop and is packed with produce. There are other types of living conditions in the city too. Sometimes a little path will lead off the street into a tiny stone courtyard off which are a dozen or more tiny apartments. Even the urban elite (cadres, doctors or engineers) frequently live with three or more to a room in what they describe as cramped conditions, many not having a refrigerator or washing machine. It is these
Plate 15. Washing hair, Hanoi

Plate 16. Playing cards, Hanoi
Plate 17. Washing clothes, Hanoi

Plate 18. Combined house/shop, Hanoi
This one room was a bicycle shop as well as a home for 5 people. Cooking is done on the pavement.
conditions which very much affect notions of public and private space. The stamp of success presently is to have a 'nha rieng' or 'separate house', that is, a house or a room not with one’s parents or grandparents. Very few people can afford such a separate room but those who do, protect their space by locking it with a bolt and even by putting barbed wire and broken glass on top of the walls that surround this space. This is in contrast to dwellings in which 10 or more people live together and where nothing is locked or closed off because it would be too inconvenient to allow free passage of people. Thus the wealthier people become the more they guard their space and this is not because they wish to protect their property but, rather, because they do not want to have family and neighbours intruding in their personal space. Whenever I spoke to people in their homes in Vietnam if it was not in a ‘separate house’ dozens of people would walk in and out – neighbours, friends, people selling things – never knocking or announcing their arrival. However in ‘separate houses’ people always close the door when inviting a guest inside. The Vietnamese in Australia behave similarly, mostly living with their extended family in one house until financially able to live separately.

The small and independent family has, for many Vietnamese-Australians come to symbolise a separation from Vietnam, where the extended family was revered. The nuclear family and the controlling of fertility has thus come to represent a superior form of sociality. The family in a small separate house is thus seen as virtuous, and as having achieved modernity. This explains the gradual transformation of ‘Vietnamese suburbs’ in Sydney into spaces that to some degree replicate the urban Vietnamese lifestyle. However, both in Australia and in Hanoi those who live in separate houses talk with sadness about the loss of their former communal living style, and almost always wish to retain populous public spaces where people may trade, talk, eat and relax together.

Imprints on suburbia

It is clear that in Sydney, as in any city, there are numerous divided social and economic spheres which are separated by geographical distance as well as social inequities. It is frequently institutions; schools, councils and government departments, which create patterns of separation and division by reinforcing discriminatory and marginalising practices. An examination of the changes Vietnamese, and other ethnic groups, have effected upon the 'Australian suburb', is
important for what it reveals about the nature of suburban race relations. In spite of the wide range of class backgrounds, Vietnamese by their very presence have transformed western Sydney; workplaces, schools and streetscapes. As mentioned earlier, the term 'ghetto' is frequently deployed to describe Vietnamese areas (for example, see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1993:3), and this description is an image of the relationships of city life. Some urban planners (for example, Hugh Stretton, 1975) have viewed the Australian urban environment as offering the incarnation of the desires of many migrants who have come from more crowded environments (see Watson, 1992) However, this view is an ethnocentric one as notions of privacy and crowding are culturally constituted. As has been demonstrated in previous chapters, value is placed on intense levels of social interaction in Vietnam as revealed in notions of the house as primarily a social world. In Australia, the large backyard, the privacy of houses and gardens, and the relatively low density of housing is unappealing to many Vietnamese families. The culturally alien nature of the suburban backyard is unmasked through the ways that the Vietnamese in Australia have on many occasions transformed it into a different space. Many families have pulled down fences between adjoining properties in the Cabramatta area when the neighbouring families are other Vietnamese. Families frequently try to buy up adjacent houses for extended family members. Where this is not possible, many households consist of several related families, or several generations under the one roof. Whenever I asked people what they most missed about Vietnam, one of the most frequent replies is exemplified in this comment by a man in his thirties,

*In Vietnam, I could walk down the street and everyone would call out and ask me about my family, where I was going and things like that. Sometimes I would get involved with talking and not leave the street for hours at a time. Other times if I was working on something, fixing something for example, I would sit on the front step of the house so I could talk to everyone passing in the street. People would share food and news about people I knew. Its lonely here. People in my street don’t want to know each other. That’s why we (Vietnamese) like to live near each other.*

The wish of many Vietnamese to hear their language, buy food they are familiar with, and be near friends and family combined with their fear of impersonality has led to the transformation of many public spaces and suburbs in the western suburbs of Sydney. A clustering of Vietnamese people in certain locations in Australian cities has been a very necessary experience for many families dealing with the loss
of their homeland. Many Vietnamese people cannot afford telephones or cars when they first arrive in Australia, and this increases the necessity to have direct engagement with other Vietnamese people. Residential clustering of Vietnamese people makes church attendance more easy, especially for older people. The high value of privacy and lack of crowding evident in dominant conceptions of Australian spatial formations has historically effected the way in which public spaces have developed (ibid). Public spaces have come to be associated with anonymity and lack of intimacy. By contrast, the purposes of the public spaces for many Vietnamese include that they should be the spaces of communal life in which a high level of social interaction takes place, not spaces in which individuals move about as strangers.

In the commercial areas of western Sydney, shops and other businesses are the most dominant feature of public space. In parts of Cabramatta and elsewhere in the Fairfield region where there is a high Vietnamese spatial concentration, there has been an attempt to recreate the feel of an Asian marketplace, often in pedestrian malls. For the most part this has been resisted by local councils who argue that food must be refrigerated and that is is difficult to maintain hygiene ‘standards’ if such a utilisation of space occurs. Where this has been permitted the spaces resemble those in Vietnam, with their focus upon social interaction rather than purely commercial exchange. By this I mean that many Vietnamese meet in the commercial areas as part of an informal social network, but also to exchange information about jobs and services. There are social aspects to Vietnamese businesses that make them different from mainstream businesses in that these businesses rarely employ strangers, that many friends and relatives work together. Many of the stores sell food, health and household items specifically for Vietnamese people. The presence of these stores along with restaurants and Vietnamese language signs assist in providing spaces through which Vietnamese people can maintain their social networks. For Vietnamese people, as for many migrants, the claiming of physical space as their own can prevent a sense of alienation and isolation in suburban areas.

The process involved in the naming of public places has also been of importance in both the assertion of a visible Vietnamese community, and in the resistance to that presence by others in the community. In the Nhan-Quyen Vietnamese language newspaper on Feb. 22, 1990, p. 14,15, a report stated that,

‘The Fairfield Council ...had organised a referendum on the naming of a square in the Cabramatta area. One of the suggested names is Long
Tan Square, to commemorate the Australian Army’s victory during the Vietnam War. The article calls on readers to sign a petition to ensure that name would be adopted. Such support would show their gratitude to the fighting spirit of the Australian Army and to the supreme sacrifice paid by some of its members.\textsuperscript{49}

The square was eventually called Freedom Plaza, an ethnically non-specific name.

Cabramatta can be viewed from a myriad of positions. In terms of industry and the economy it is an area where informal economies thrive, where most are unskilled workers and where there is an abundance of sweatshops and smallscale manufacturing.\textsuperscript{50} Cabramatta is visioned as being both belonging to and not belonging to the city of Sydney. The notion that Vietnamese people are ‘exiled’ within the outer suburbs of Sydney does not reflect the state of extreme dispersal of the Vietnam-born population of Sydney. Firstly, the highest populations of Vietnamese occur in the Fairfield-Cabramatta area and the Marrickville area in the inner city. The Marrickville area is more popular for northern Vietnamese, particularly recent arrivals from Hong Kong refugee camps. The northern/southern split in the Vietnamese communities is very apparent, and there is frequent tension between the two groups. Their locations in Sydney thus reflect distinctions that they wish to make themselves. Nevertheless, the census statistics of the spatial concentrations of Vietnamese people in Sydney show that Vietnamese people live in every suburb of the city, and that, over time, they move out of areas of high spatial concentration. In spite of this, some areas are definitely more popular, not just for housing but for work and leisure too. Importantly, Sydney’s central business district with its concentration of corporate culture, is not very appealing to Vietnamese people. The city’s major businesses and corporations housed in tall office buildings hold a sense of authority to those unconnected with it.\textsuperscript{51} As Huy told me,

\textsuperscript{49}This article was translated for MicroMais at the National Library of Australia. All reports from Vietnamese newspapers that appear in this text are from MicroMais translations unless otherwise stated.

\textsuperscript{50}Sassen (1996:150) suggests that an informal economy is often viewed as ‘a distortion, an import from the third world’. This negative view of informal economies along with the state’s inability to control them has led the mainstream to associate them with criminality.

\textsuperscript{51}Sassen (1996:144) argues that ‘The dense concentrations of tall buildings in major downtowns or in the new edge cities are the site for corporate culture - though, they are also the site for other forms of inhabitation, which have been rendered invisible’.

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It's all offices and people rushing. We never go there. Those people have important jobs, money. It is not a place for families and so Vietnamese people do not like it.

This statement indicates that Huy believed that power lay in the centre of Sydney and that he could never have access to it. Nevertheless, families as they become more successful, move out of what are thought to be ‘Vietnamese’ areas. Nhung’s family, for example, moved five times in the first ten years they have been in Australia. They were considered to be a highly successful family. Both Nhung and her husband work for Australia Post, which is regarded as a high status workplace among Vietnamese people. Their first house was in Fairfield. They bought it after only two years in Australia during which time they lived in rented apartments on the railway line near Cabramatta. The next two moves were to more expensive and larger houses in that neighbourhood. Their fourth move was to Stanmore, a non-Vietnamese area and their final move was to Kogarah, completely away from most Vietnamese activities.

There appears to have always been an ambivalence on the part of majority Australian culture towards accepting refugees (Markus, 1994). However, there have always been fluctuations in the level of mistrust extended to new migrants. Recently, reports of crime and drugs in Vietnamese enclaves have increased the social distance between non-Vietnamese and Vietnamese. Whether it is the media emphasis on crime or people’s experience of crime, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that most residents of Sydney’s south-west, where Cabramatta is situated, see crime as a major problem in their area. One of the psychosocial aspects of the fear of violence is that it diminishes the freedom of movement. It circumscribes daily life; people operate between boundaries which are known. By becoming more isolated in the community people become more vulnerable and separate themselves from those in their physical and social world who are unknown. Many Vietnamese families in Cabramatta have reported to me that since the mid-1980s non-Vietnamese in the area have become less communicative and less tolerant of their Vietnamese neighbours.

In western Sydney, while there have been numerous incidents of racism directed towards recent migrants, there has also been a continued effort to counteract racism at a local institutional and bureaucratic level. In the political arena there has been some attempt at inclusionary practices, positions have been created for health and community workers, and there have been numerous local government initiatives to
provide information and advice in community languages. In spite of this, displays of cultural difference within the built environment are often seen as intrusive and have encountered much resistance (see Watson, 1992). For example, an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* after John Newman’s murder began, ‘Cabramatta is simultaneously the fulfilment of our migration dream and its nightmarish conclusion. An amalgam of poverty and prosperity, marked by high-rise flats with laundry-draped balconies, it is a dazzling collision between Australian suburban ugliness and South-East Asian big city garishness’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September, 1994:8). As Watson (1992) reports, the effort to disallow any prominent expression of cultural difference in public spaces is most obvious when migrants wish to erect buildings for religious worship, such as Vietnamese pagodas. Building approvals for such constructions may be refused and non-Vietnamese locals have often vehemently protested against the erection of conspicuous religious structures. Such comments as the following by a local non-Vietnamese politician speaking about a new Vietnamese Buddhist place of worship, are rather commonplace in the local newspapers,

‘...the temple will not be an asset. There are no Vietnamese people living there. You are hoping to put in a complete foreign body in anticipation of people coming to use it’ (*Fairfield Advocate* 3 March, 1983, pp.4).

Watson (1992), an urban planner has suggested that the body metaphor (used above) is frequently employed to define notions of a ‘correct’ urban form and reflects the desire to maintain uniformity. Here, Anglo-Australia is viewed as being defiled by the presence of difference and diversity. The conception that Vietnamese people inhabit ghettos categorises them as linked to criminality and drugs, as well as ascribing them with a lack of independence. The cultural construction of enclaves as harmful by the mainstream is clearly at odds with the Vietnamese view of such concentrations as affirming their identity as Vietnamese. Paradoxically, concentrations of Anglo-Australian peoples into spatially, socially and politically separate and often segregated locations may be viewed as a positive response to the perceived danger of migrant groups or categories of people outside the mainstream. The Asian restaurants and shops in areas like Cabramatta are seen as one of the only acceptable and controllable means to signify diversity and a multicultural ethos within the urban landscape of Australia.

The structuring of urban environments can also have profound influence on the health of the inhabitants of a city. Lenore Manderson indicated in her paper
‘Indochinese health: Creating Cultural Fictions’ (Manderson, 1990) that the way in which Indochinese people have been stereotyped in medical literature has led to an assumption that many of the health ‘problems’ of Indochinese related to their cultural behaviour and their lack of familiarity with health services and Western medicine (1990:67). While not denying that the difficulties encountered by Indochinese prior to and during the process of migration, such as physical and emotional stresses and deprivations, have impacted upon the health needs and responses of Indochinese people, Manderson suggests that much of the inequality in access to health care can be related to the experiences of marginalisation that many newly arrived migrants undergo here in our cities. She states,

‘other factors colour the health profiles of newly immigrant peoples and should not be overlooked – the occupational health risks to those who are employed in unskilled and semi-skilled capacity, for example; the deprivations, including with respect to access to health care, that are associated with low income and residence in poorer areas of the cities in which new immigrants are located’ (1990:68-9, my emphasis).

That is, by making the response to certain health issues ethnically-focused, longterm inequalities may not be addressed and may create ‘health service ghettos’ (1990:71), where in migrant areas of the city there may be a lack of specialist and health-related services. The process of urban marginalisation can thus have an impact on both the health needs of Vietnamese people as well as their use of health services. Further, residential concentration acts to make Vietnamese people conspicuous as a group which may lead to the notion that all Vietnamese are unhealthy, working-class factory people and that many are involved in criminal activities and drug-dealing (ibid). This, in turn, may result in more extreme forms of alienation and distance.

Discussion

Diasporas by their nature link global politics, history and places with the local. The local refers not just to an immediate regional environment but to personal, and everyday experience. The house is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space and the conjunctions between the global and the local. The personal histories of many Vietnamese-Australians tell of interminable movement, and of loss of homes, repeatedly associated with family breakdown and profound social change within Vietnam prior to their departure. The transplanting of
lives from Vietnam and the loss of a cultural-spatial Vietnamese world has resulted in a reinscribing of Vietnamese cultural life on Australian places. Appurduai (1996:54-5) has called this process a ‘reterritorialisation’ of place, which aptly describes the creation of communities in specific locales. After having confronted locations in Australia that were not easily comprehended or favourably experienced, Vietnamese people arriving in Australia from Vietnam have created a creolisation of space in Australian cities that has allowed them to construct a culturally meaningful landscape.
Chapter 6

In the margins: representations of Vietnamese-Australians

This chapter will explore the nature of recent media representations of Vietnamese in Australia. I will first examine the origins of this imagery and then scrutinise the way in which the images have changed over time. This will reveal how gender, race and class are interwoven in ways that mark out the manner in which Vietnamese refugees have become a new social category, 'Asian migrants' whose images have come to be associated with specific places, places seen as dangerous and corrupting. Finally, I will contrast representations in the mainstream press with those in the Vietnamese press in order to further elucidate the contemporary constructions of Vietnamese identities.

Historical background to images of Vietnam and the Vietnamese

The impact of the non-Vietnamese representations of Vietnamese upon their identity cannot be underestimated. The West primarily sights its vision of Vietnamese through the lens of the Vietnam war, the most visually represented war in history. It is often difficult for the broader Australian community to grasp that for most Vietnamese the American war was only the last of a long line of colonial and foreign involvement in their country. Vietnamese people have told me how much they tire of being questioned by Australians about their experiences of the Vietnam War, most being too young to remember it. It has been noted that cinematic representations of the Vietnam War have replaced 'even so called factual analyses as the discourse of the war' (Anderegg, 1991:1). Certainly, the war became a television event, a tragic serial drama stretched over thousands of nights in the consciousness of America and its allies.

The dominant images of Vietnamese subjects in war films were extremely stereotyped. Few films even acknowledged Vietnamese people as subjects. When Vietnamese people are present the highly negative characterisations are directed at both the enemy, the Vietcong, and the South Vietnamese Army. The Vietcong in film became the cinematic image of the enemy as woman. This is clear in the filmic analyses of America's loss of the war which frequently include mention of the
notion that those who appear to be innocent turn out to be the enemy. This is indicated by the following comment of an American war analyst ‘there was no reliable criterion to distinguish a pretty Vietnamese girl from a deadly enemy; often they were one and the same person’ (O’Brien in Lewis, 1985:93). Thus films about Vietnam tend to associate Vietnamese with cruelty and cunning. The contrast between Western values and Vietnamese values were constantly created in the discourse surrounding the war. General Westmoreland, for example, once expressed the view that ‘the oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as the Westerner’ (from *Hearts and Minds* quoted in Desser, 1991:92). These images of Vietnam and Vietnamese have become involved in the flow of representations of Vietnamese in Australia. At the beginning of the Vietnamese refugee crisis, Australia’s involvement in Vietnam led many non-Vietnamese to believe that Australia must take a principled position and accept refugees because of a moral and humanitarian obligation (Viviani, 1984:56).

Since the Vietnam War, Vietnam has been viewed as representative of underdevelopment and, until the late 1980s has been seen as a political adversary. The Vietnamese have also been constructed through the dominant lens of Hollywood in war movies or as victims – the ‘boat people’. Because of the dramatic nature of their escape by sea, the Vietnamese received much more media attention than the other Indochinese who departed their countries by land. From the colonisation of Vietnam up until the present, the western vision of Vietnam and the Vietnamese has thus already melded with Vietnamese identity in what has been an ongoing struggle to define themselves and to resist the dominance of external representations.

During the period when Vietnamese refugees began to arrive on Australian shores, massive changes in Australian attitudes towards migration were underway. From 1975 to 1984 the policies of multiculturalism accelerated with widespread institutional reforms. The non-European population increased from 0.5% in 1947 to

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52 The word ‘cunning’ appears frequently in representations of Vietnamese. For example, a Victorian police report on Asian crime described Vietnamese as ‘being the most dangerous and cunning criminals in the state’ (The Age, 11 Sep., 1992:p.3). This is an example of the continuation of a representational theme from the Vietnam War, in which the enemy, the Vietcong, were portrayed as evil and cunning. Many Vietnamese in Australia use the dominant representations of themselves for their own purposes. Several Vietnamese women told me that they like to present themselves, when applying for jobs, for example, as hardworking and cunning in business while being superficially solicitous.
2.5% in 1984. Though the movement for multiculturalism predated the end of the White Australia policy its success in the 1970s and 1980s was accompanied by the arrival of significant numbers of Asian migrants. This gave rise to conservatives such as Blainey questioning of the implications of Asian immigration for social cohesion. As the beginnings of a multicultural philosophy occurred at the same time as a refugee crisis in Vietnam in 1975, the Vietnamese are often viewed as the test case of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism was initially greeted in a celebratory way and media organisations generally attempted to imbue the related news items with positive messages. The Vietnamese arrivals presented difficulties for these organisations because there was entrenched anti-Asian racism, yet the period of multicultural and anti-discriminatory reform obliged them to present compassionate stories (see Pittman, 1993:30).

The first images of Vietnamese refugees

Adrian Carton (1994), who has examined images of Vietnamese soon after 1975 found almost no images of Vietnamese men in this early settlement period (Figures 1-3). Why were women selected to represent all Vietnamese refugees? At that time the prevailing attitude was that Australia was benevolent and generous in accepting refugees who were seen the victims of unfortunate circumstances beyond our boundaries. The media played a role in attempting to reinforce feelings of compassion and dispel anxiety surrounding the ‘uninvited’ arrivals. Women were used as signs as they more easily fit with prevailing attitudes about their expected passivity and were not seen as a threat. Women were also sometimes viewed as a pleasurable visual spectacle. The images presented women in a manner that accentuated their submissiveness and harmless innocence by displaying photographs of them with children, and often smiling or with heads bowed. So soon after the end of Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War, it would have been more difficult for the wider community to feel comfortable with images of Vietnamese men arriving on our shores.

531 think it is useful to compare the recent images of the arrival of Cambodian and Chinese boat people with early images of boat people in the late 1970s. The recent images show that boat people are seen as a threat to the nation and images include people being dragged by custom’s officials, being hosed down upon arrival, or later, in detention behind barbed wire. Rather than being viewed as people needing help they are seen as a totally unacceptable presence and as revealing the vulnerability of our boundaries.
Refugee 73 arrive in open boats

Perth — Seventy-three refugees, who opened a 38-metre sampan versus Perth, are expected to arrive in the port of the capital. They are expected to stay permanently in Australia.

Figure 1. The Age, 27 June, 1977
Vietnamese women arriving on Australian shores after boat voyage (cf. Carton, 1994)

**Settling in for life...**

By CAROL KITCHING

In Vietnam, Mrs Truong Thi Thom and her family lived in a house of wood and bamboo. Now they’re living in a solid three-bedroom brick flat in Nunawading’s Eastbridge Hostel.

Mrs Truong said her family was settling well into the Australian way of life, although it was very different from that in Vietnam.
Viets jet in to new life

ANOTHER group of South Vietnamese refugees flew into Melbourne from Malaysia on Saturday.

And yesterday they settled into the Enterprise Hotel in Westall St, Ivanhoe, and enjoyed New Year's Day with meals of roast lamb and potatoes.

Some, like Duong Thi Bach Cuc, 29, and her sister, Duong Thi Minh, 27, could speak a little English, enough to understand what was happening to them and their relatives.

For the young it was a day of strange new fears of strange tasting foods of strange timing in a strange dining room.

Trinh My Linh, 3, and her brother, Trinh Minh, 4, for instance found out for the first time what roast potatoes tasted like.

For the adults it was just another day, but just a little closer to finding security in a new land.

• A refugee boat, Thanh-Tai, reached Darwin Harbor last night. It was escorted to the offshore quarantine head by the Navy patrol boat, Adini.

The Thanh-Tai is the 38th refugee boat to arrive in Darwin.

The latest arrival was a surprise sighting by a Coast-Watcher early yesterday morning, carried 38 men, women and children.

It is understood the 38-metre vessel set out five weeks ago from a Malaysian refugee camp.

The Thanh-Tai was sighted at Green Island, about 30 miles south-east of Darwin, and intercepted by the Ardent in early afternoon.

• DUONG THI BACH CUC in the rose garden at the Enterprise Hotel yesterday.

Figure 3. The Sun, 2 January, 1978
Woman with a bunch of flowers.
The first news stories and photographs of the arrival of Vietnamese people on our shores depicted them as needing help and as being destitute and impoverished. Many of the stories referred more to the perceived stability and advantages of Australia than to the suffering of refugees. Pittman (1993:31), in a study of media representations of Vietnamese people, found that these first images constructed Vietnamese people as innocent victims of a cruel regime, as well as viewing them as innocuous and non-threatening to the mainstream society. The underlying theme of these early stories was that Vietnamese people would gradually become acculturated to Australia and blend in, if not physically, then socially and politically. Not only were Vietnamese people viewed as being able to accommodate Australian norms, but in the articles’ underlying defense of Australian values, Vietnamese people were those who wanted and desired to assimilate (ibid). This was evident in the large number of stories about individuals attempting to ‘fit in’, to learn the language, and to separate themselves from Vietnam. The individuals concerned became members of a multicultural Australian society, and in doing so had to effectively disown their Vietnameseness. So, although the theme of the ‘different’ ethnicity of these individuals was stressed, their individual stories were muted for the higher goal of multiculturalism. Most of this type of human interest story are the stereotyped stories of the refugee making good. For example,

‘Lieutenant Tam Tran, 23, had survived an encounter with pirates on a boat voyage to Australia 13 years ago, and was about to become the first Vietnamese born doctor in the Australian Army. She could only say ‘hello’ in English when she arrived, but went on to succeed in high school and win an army scholarship 18 months after she began her course in medicine’ (Sun (Qld), 15 Dec. 1988).

The paradoxical aspect of an article such as this one is that, in an attempt to convey the benefits of becoming Australian (significantly, of joining the national Army), Tam Tran’s attachment to Vietnam is eclipsed by her attachment to Australia (see Pittman, 1993:32). Her Vietnamese identity is assumed through the mention of a ‘boat voyage’ and ‘pirates’ and no effort is made to mention anything about her past in another country, her own language or her cultural values and experiences. The effect is to highlight her assimilation to Australian values and her commitment to being Australian. The utter denial of her Vietnamese background is a way of absenting and devaluing her difference and muting her voice (ibid). These first human interest stories did not associate the Vietnamese with particular suburbs in our major cities but, rather, were placeless. Individuals were separated not just from Vietnam but from the public spaces of Australia cities. This was to change
dramatically in the later 1980s when almost all representations of Vietnamese were within locations which have come to be viewed as dangerous ghettos (see Figure 4).

A transition occurred during the 1980s when overt anti-Asian racism reared its head with the ‘Blainey debate’, a public airing of anti-Asian sentiment by a prominent Australian historian, Geoffrey Blainey. Vietnamese people had formed into sizable communities and were now viewed as migrants rather than refugees. By the 1990s obvious anti-Vietnamese sentiment was clear throughout media organisations. Scanning newspapers in both Sydney and Melbourne over 1993-1995 I found over 1000 articles about Vietnamese-Australians. By far the bulk of these articles refer to negative aspects of the Vietnamese presence in Australia. Further, the human interest stories described above as well as those portraying ethnicity as a spectacle in our cities continue to perpetuate stereotypes of Vietnamese people. While there is a preponderance of food-related articles, these articles rarely mention individual Vietnamese people or the Vietnamese communities in Australia. These articles, mostly focused upon restaurants or recipes, indicate that at least in the media, food is considered the only contribution of Vietnamese migration to Australia54.

Stereotypes are perpetuated often by politicians wishing to curry favour with their ethnic constituency. In 1986, for example, the then Shadow Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs took out an advertisement in a Vietnamese women’s journal, *Tap Chi Tuong Tro Tren Dat Moi* - Mutual Assistance in a New Land. It read,

‘The Federal Opposition sends its greeting of good wishes and expressions of admiration to those Australians who come here from Vietnam. We appreciate their hard work, their strong family values, and their commitment to freedom and liberty. These values are shared and supported by fellow Australians’ (April,1986 (20):14).

Very often the human interest stories also promote these stereotypes, choosing ‘successful’ refugees who show the accepted values. An article in the *Sunday Mail* (8 Dec, 1991:5) was entitled, ‘Boat people thrive in Brisbane’. The story was about three male Vietnamese refugees and although it describes briefly the trauma of their boat trip to Australia, the story focuses upon their occupational success in Australia. In Vietnam their occupations were school principal, lawyer and journalist, and

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54 Cook and Crang (1996) provide a detailed analysis of displacement and ‘ethnic food’.

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Walls of silence, streets of fear

Extravagant violence, murder ... and never any silence. That's the city's harsh reality: an endless cycle of crime, with the local MP a bystander and the civic mayor a visitor.

MALCOLM DRowH reports.

Figure 4. Sydney Morning Herald, 11 June, 1994, p.28
dentist. The article stated that these three ‘typify’ the experience of boat people, but it is obvious that they are anything but typical. In Australia, the first of the three works for the Queensland Department of Education, the second as an artist, and the third a dentist. The article is a clear example of the attempt to exemplify certain refugees as ‘good Australians’, people who ‘made it’, and who joined the broader society in spite of hardship at the beginning, people who did not live differently. At the same time, the reporting of exceptional cases of success are read as just that; they are seen as atypical and therefore reinforce the notion that the refugee norm is to fail, to never quite achieve, and to be a burden upon society. While these three are chosen to typify the ‘refugee made good’ there are also human interest stories from the other end of the spectrum, stories of hopelessness which highlight violence and the social security spiral of refugees along with the paternalistic role of Australian bureaucracy in helping such people. An example of this type of story was in The Age (20 March, 1994:1). This story entitled, ‘Inside our secret sanctuaries’, although purportedly about women’s refuges in general, is focused solely upon a Vietnamese woman who was a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her Vietnamese husband. The beginning of the article sets the tone for what follows,

‘It is the end of a long, fearful day. The tears burst out as Li sinks on to her lower bunk, cradling the baby she brought with her, which is wrapped in a thin green towel. Her sister, Lam, also threatened by Li’s husband, carries the few possessions they managed to bring: a kettle, a blanket and a can of infant formula’.

These stories promote the notion of the ‘burden’ to Australian society of the Vietnamese presence and attribute Vietnamese males with violence, while portraying Vietnamese women as victims of violence.

Violence and the Vietnamese subject

The death of the Member of Parliament, John Newman, in Cabramatta, on Monday 5th September, 1994, revealed the extent to which negative representations of the Vietnamese community in Australia lurk beneath the surface of the positive, liberal, and egalitarian face of multiculturalism promoted by government policy. The murder catalysed and intensified stereotypes. For example, the cover article of Time Australia, 19 September, 1994, was entitled ‘Gang Land; a Sydney murder
spotlights a world of crime’ (Figures 5-8). The article focused upon Asian crime, with visual images of the scene of John Newman’s death, a dragon sculpture in the streets of Cabramatta, an Asian gangmember in Los Angeles, and a Sydney junkie injecting heroin. The words of John Newman topped two pages in large letters “It is vital that something be done to quell the rising tide of Asian gangs, which monopolize the streets” (p. 26-27). Within the text of the article there is frequent mention of the violence of Vietnamese people towards other Vietnamese people. For example,

‘A more fearsome form of intimidation is the gangland practice of home invasion. Newman liked to call it “urban terrorism” but even that description seems somehow pale. The victims usually come from the ranks of Vietnamese business owners, many of whom don’t trust banks and keep large sums in cash or jewellery at home. The gangs strike in groups of three or four, forcing their way into homes and wreaking havoc. In one attack in Cabramatta in March, invaders slit the pet dog’s throat and slashed the arms of the father of the household. Often, parents and children are separated with threats and torture – and the screams of unseen loved ones – are used as a foretaste of the family’s fate if they dare talk to police’ (p.25).

This story, written in a sensational style portrays Vietnamese people as vicious, particularly to their own people. There is also a suggestion that the victims are partly to blame because they do not ‘trust banks’ and keep valuables at home. This is seen partly as an explanation for the gangs’ exploits as no equivalent explanation is given for why people join gangs or may become brutal. That these activities are seen as worse than ‘urban terrorism’ which is viewed as a ‘pale’ description, links Vietnamese people to anarchy. Vietnamese gang activity is thus seen as not just directed against Vietnamese people, but as being a war against the state.

Since the mid-1980s, the most frequent image of Vietnamese people has been of young Vietnamese males. When women are portrayed it is most frequently as victims, behind the ‘wall of silence’ (see Figure 4). During the reporting of John Newman’s murder investigation, the particular image of the ‘wall of silence’ has been a recurrent representation of Vietnamese, and carries with it notions of a protection and fostering of criminality among Vietnamese people. It roots are based historically in the image of the enemy during the Vietnam War (Anderegg, 1991), when Vietcong were viewed as being inhuman and sadistic. These perceptions have persisted into the contemporary moment in Australia. For example, a report in the
Figure 5. Time Magazine, 19 September, 1994, p.1
END OF A CRUSADE

John Newman's death put a new focus on his life's work: fighting gang terror against Asian Australians.

Figure 6. *Time Magazine*, 19 September, 1994, p. 24-5
It is vital that something be done to quell the rising tide of Asian gangs, which monopolize the streets

Figure 7. *Time Magazine*, 19 September, 1994, p. 26-7
GATEWAY TO CABRAMATTA: A pathway to private fear for many Asian Australians

Figure 8. Time Magazine, 19 September, 1994, p. 28
Sydney Morning Herald (11 June, 1994:28) even before Newman’s murder, was headlined, Walls of Silence, Streets of Fear’ (Figure 4) and begins, ‘Extortion, violence, murder... and never any witnesses. This is no media beat-up; something is very wrong in Sydney’s wild western suburbs when the local MP is threatened and even the mayor warns visitors to take care’.

A non-engagement with mainstream government agencies, particularly the police, is considered not a legitimate behaviour and un-Australian. Among non-Vietnamese community workers ‘the wall of silence’ is a much used expression and has its antecedents in the notion of the ‘inscrutable’ Asian. The enigma of the Newman murder signified for many the validity of this stereotype of inscrutability. Continuing uncertainty over who was the murderer only reinforced the tabloid conviction of Vietnamese people on trial.

The walls that are set up on both sides of racial/cultural divides are accentuated by socioeconomic and physical separations. These bounded spaces can be both a form of resistance and a protective shield against the mainstream. Marcuse has examined symbolic and actual walls within cities to show that they may represent economic and social barriers (Marcuse, 1995:249). He asks, ‘Does the wall perpetuate the power of the powerful, or defend the powerless; does it protract domination or shield vulnerability?’ (ibid). The dynamic and fluid nature of these bounded spaces that Vietnamese people often find themselves in, are in a constant state of flux and may be apparent in the workplace, school or on the street. Similarly the erection of barriers might be conspicuous in newspaper representations, in the inability to move freely within the city, or in differing views of the landscape. Having arrived in a country where they were strangers has led Vietnamese people to be aware of the development of a ranking of places in which some people are labelled as belonging and others as exterior. This means that the economy as well as the politics and social life of the majority culture differentiates people into those who are able to make decisions and those who are liminal to structures of power, and into places

55 For example, in a newspaper article about a study of discrimination in the Victorian labour market (The Age, 29 Oct, 1991:13 reporting on Evans & Kelley, 1988:1-3), it was found that, in answering job advertisements, people with Vietnamese names encountered discrimination about six times as often as those with Anglo-Celtic names. However, the apparent frequency of discrimination was not reflected in the number of cases being taken to the Equal Opportunity Commissioner. The article suggested that ‘immigrant groups may be unaware of their rights’ while no mention was made of the frequent claims by Vietnamese people that such agencies themselves discriminate against them.
that welcome some and deny entry to others (see Sarup, 1994:101). Events like that of John Newman’s death are moments of urban upheaval in which popular consciousness is raised about the issues of social polarisation and alienation. The geographer Edward Soja who has written extensively about Los Angeles and the ‘post-modern’ city and has alerted many urban theorists to the importance of examining the interrelationships between social hierarchies, the arrangement of the city’s form, and the creation of boundaries within cities as well as links beyond them (Watson and Gibson, 1995:6). The ‘urban imaginary’ that Soja (1995) speaks of, refers to the process of through which connections between social groups become disguised or vividly perceptible. Events like Newman’s murder highlight the unfolding of the urban imaginary by revealing the unacceptability of certain forms of presence of Vietnamese in Australia through their portrayal in the media and through state controls on their public life.

In an article in the Sydney Morning Herald (8 Sept, 1994:2) (Figure 9), about the Newman killing, although stating that it was premature and unhelpful to conclude that Asian crime gangs were involved, the illustration was a photograph of a Minda Correctional Centre inmate showing the 5Ts indicating his Vietnamese gang membership, on his left arm (tinh – love, tien – money, tu – prison, tu – to die, toi – conviction). In spite of the relatively fair coverage in the written piece, the photograph supported the guilt of the Vietnamese in perpetrating the crime. This image along with an image of a murdered ST gangmember were seen repeatedly over the following weeks (see Figures 10 and 11). Sometimes written articles may not be overtly racist but the accompanying photographs lead the reader to obvious conclusions about the ethnic attributions of the perpetrators of the crime that has been reported upon. Photographs are a particularly potent way of reinforcing fear of Vietnamese people. Although the media was sometimes confused about whether the murder of Newman was a politically motivated crime or a gangland killing, the images portrayed defined the perpetrator as undoubtedly Vietnamese. Headlines also mirrored Vietnamese guilt. For example, on the front page of the Australian, 7 September, 1994, p. 1 the word ‘assassination’ was prominent, indicating both treachery and a political motive (Figure 12).

The purportedly violent nature of Vietnamese-Australians is by far the most common image of Vietnamese in media representations. In the West Australian (16 March, 1993:1) an article entitled ‘Terror Gangs Target Asians’ stated
THE NEWMAN KILLING

Cabramatta figure ‘behind murder’

Scrutiny sends gangs underground

Figure 9. Sydney Morning Herald, 8 September, 1994, p.2
Figure 10. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 August, 1995, p. 29
MP’s murder: won’t anyone tell?

BY PHILIP CONRAN

The dream of police solving the murder of NSW Labor politician Mr John Newman in 1993 is over. For 21 months the cold case has been the subject of a murder inquiry. After four months in the Senate the Labor opposition has decided to seek an independent inquiry into the Newman murder. The Newman family have written to Prime Minister Paul Keating expressing their disappointment over the police handling of the case.

With the exception of Mr Newman’s murder in Sydney there are no other major inquiries into significant cases. The police inquiry into the Newman case is one of the few major inquiries into significant cases. The Newman family have written to Prime Minister Paul Keating expressing their disappointment over the police handling of the case.

The Newman family have written to Prime Minister Paul Keating expressing their disappointment over the police handling of the case.

The Newman family have written to Prime Minister Paul Keating expressing their disappointment over the police handling of the case.
ASSASSINATION OF A CRIME FIGHTER

John Neumann fought with courage for the benefit of the Asian community. I am the second target.

Slain MP top of hit list

Backlash fears hit force hunts killers

Area in grip of key gang

Figure 12. The Australian, 7 September, 1994, p.1
'Asian extortionists are preying on Perth businessmen who are not reporting the offences because they fear violent reprisals and have little faith in the police or legal system. The head of the new Asian police squad in WA, said police have uncovered several rackets involving Asians on both sides. Asian criminals, especially Vietnamese, terrorised their victims through their reputation for sudden violence.'

Vietnamese body images usually include the sense of being smaller than the average non-Vietnamese Australian and gives most Vietnamese people an everpresent sense of their marginality in physical terms. These representations have a clear impact upon public perceptions of Vietnamese people as dangerous.

In newspaper reporting the lack of diversity in news items relating to Vietnamese people has a profound impact upon the circulating definitions of Vietnamese identity in popular culture (Pittman, 1993:29). By far the bulk of reports on the Vietnamese presence are items related to criminal events, and the subject matter is primarily focussed upon violence, robbery or the heroin trade. In almost all the articles about Vietnamese migrants, few Vietnamese people are interviewed. Those who were interviewed were usually community leaders. Others chosen to speak for Vietnamese subjects are local ‘experts’, ranging from the local mayor to non-Vietnamese shopkeepers. The use of photographs often assists in maintaining fixed visual stereotypes (ibid). The ethnicity of subjects is often only reported when the individual has the expected attributes, therefore eternalising immutable ethnic definitions. That Cabramatta or ‘the wild West of Sydney’ is almost always associated with the Vietnamese presence means that even if ethnicity is not ascribed to those perpetrating violent acts, the ethnicity will be assumed to be Vietnamese by the reader. In 1989 the results of a study reported that the Vietnamese were the least popular ethnic group in Australia (reported in La Fiamma, 20 July, 1989: 1-2). The reasons given were that they were given to violence. This can be presumed to be the result of continued media representations of Vietnamese as ‘naturally’ violent and dangerous.

The only film set in Australia which has featured Vietnamese people is Romper Stomper, which employed violent depictions of clashes between neo-Nazi skinheads and Vietnamese immigrants. While the film was not overtly anti-Vietnamese, it did reveal the extent to which Vietnamese people are portrayed as using aggression as a solution to problems, and prone to gang formation. Even the mayor of Fairfield in 1994, Nick Lalich had this to say via the media,
Lalich recognises that the Vietnamese, whose homeland has long been plagued by violence, can be volatile. He cites the case of a man who had a verbal dispute with some Vietnamese; he later found plumber’s glue poured over his car’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 11 June, 1994:7).

These comments came in the same article as the following one,

‘Fairfield’s mayor, Nick Lalich, tries, like all civic leaders – to present a balanced view of events. And it is clear that a lot of work has been done in recent years to develop a sophisticated view’ (ibid).

The ‘sophisticated’ views of civic leaders that Vietnamese are violent is not held up by crime statistics. The Australian Institute of Criminology has reported research that Vietnamese-Australians have a significantly lower crime rate (including violence, drink-driving and drug use) than their non-Vietnamese counterparts (Eastel, 1989).

Not only does Cabramatta provide images of fear but there is frequent reference to images of the frontier and of war in headlines such as ‘The Wild West’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 12 November, 1988:31) (Figure 13) and ‘How the West was Won by Asian Migrants’ (The Age, 29 April, 1994:8) (Figures 14). The conflict metaphor has also been apparent in writers such as Blainey, who, in his book All for Australia (1984), spoke of ‘front-line’ suburbs (p.120), ‘invaded suburbs’ (p.123), ‘war and peace in the school room’ (p. 135), and called upon people to ‘defend their neighbourhood’ (p. 128) (in Markus, 1985:32). Although boundaries are drawn between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese within the mainstream press, journalists tend to represent the barrier as one drawn only by Vietnamese people themselves. For example, an article referring to police frustration about the lack of people willing to give evidence against Vietnamese was entitled with the blatantly racist headline ‘Wise Monkeys frustrate police’ in the Telegraph Mirror (25 March, 1991:2). Another article which made assumptions about the wall of silence appeared in the Newcastle Herald (30 Jan, 1989:1) and stated,

‘Five men had raided a Bossley Park home. Mrs. Thi Di Duong was stabbed in the chest as she tried to escape through a window of her home. If the woman had not died, it is likely the raid would not have been reported to police. More vicious attacks had gone unreported. The gang was after the money of those gambling on the premises. Gambling organisations were reluctant to report they had been done over by rivals’.
Most Indo-Chinese immigrants are model citizens, but a small minority are gangsters thriving on violence.

Malcolm Brown and John Sampson went to the Taronga Park, Quandamooka, and Maribyrnong - and spoke to victims, police and people who are battling the odds to make their suburbs better places to live.

Figure 13. Sydney Morning Herald, 12 November, 1988, p.31
AUSTRALIA: WHERE THE MIGRANTS GO

The multicultural home of affluence, safety and family

Melbourne is Med on the Yarra

How the west was won by Asian migrants

Figure 14. The Age, 29 April, 1994, p.8
After John Newman's killing, few newspapers did not carry the expression 'the wall of silence' to convey the police experience of Vietnamese non-informants. In spite of newspapers suggesting that the wall was built by Vietnamese people themselves, the creation of such boundaries arises from both sides, it is both a decision on the part of the Vietnamese themselves in a challenge to outside domination, but it also is a response to difference on the part of the wider society.

**Reporting racism**

In over three years of newspaper articles that I scanned, I was able to find only one report of racism involving Vietnamese people. Contrary to what one might expect this article was not about racism directed towards Vietnamese, but about racism directed towards 'white Australians' by Vietnamese. In the *Courier Mail* (Qld) (2 July, 1991:1), the alleged incidents follow a complaint to the Human Rights Commission by a woman who alleged pro-Asian discrimination when she was sacked from her job. The following day the same newspaper described another racist incident (*Courier Mail*, Qld, 3 July, 1991:1) stating,

>'Brisbane ethnic groups have become the target of a immigrant-bashing campaign, according to the Ethnic Affairs Bureau. The Bureau’s Queensland director, Uri Themal, said allegations that a Vietnamese shopkeeper at Darra was racist because she refused to serve white Australians were the latest in a spate of anti-Asian incidents. Several women have claimed they were refused service at the Vietnamese-owned drapery because they were not Asian. The Vietnamese Community Association investigated the allegations and found the shopkeeper was not racist. The woman had poor English which may have caused the misunderstandings.'

Although the incident is described as 'immigrant-bashing' the sympathies of the journalist clearly do not lie with the Vietnamese. In spite of the Bureau of Ethnic Affairs determining that this was an incident of anti-Asian sentiment rather than the inverse, the tone of the reporting is such as to attempt to elicit sympathy towards the 'white Australians'. That attention is drawn to the Vietnamese Community Association which investigated the allegations hints at a jaundiced perspective on the part of the Vietnamese investigators. The shopkeeper's poor English is used to explain the incident, yet no question is made of why a shopkeeper would not want
to serve a potential customer. Although mainstream reports of racism towards Vietnamese are hard to find, in the Vietnamese language newspapers, racism is frequently mentioned. For example, *Nhan-Quyen* (12 Oct, 1989:1,28) commented on the racism of Bruce Ruxton. The article was entitled ‘Ruxton: a blindly prejudiced man or an outdated racist phenomenon?’ It stated that Vietnamese veterans would protest to the RSL because of anti-Vietnamese resolutions made at the RSL National conference. These resolutions included filing protests against any Vietnamese migration that was not refugee migration. Most Vietnamese people are highly aware of racism directed towards them as a group, particularly when the Blainey debate was at its peak. For example, in the *Saigon News* (30th September, 1988) an article by the Victorian Chapter of the Vietnamese Community in Australia, was headlined ‘Vietnamese bear the brunt of racism’ (p.28). This article stated that, ‘Vietnamese refugees in Australia have to bear the brunt of racist attacks initiated by the current immigration debate, said the President of the Victorian Vietnamese Community Organisation. Dr. Nguyen also said that the debate has made the relationship between the Vietnamese community and other communities regress at least twenty years.’

There have also been reports that have mentioned the rough-handling of Vietnamese youth by police (*Viet-Luan*, 24 April, 1992:11), the discrimination of immigration laws (*Viet-Luan*, 10 Sept, 1991:8,9), unfair reporting of Vietnamese activities on SBS (*Chuong Saigon*, 20 Oct, 1989:11), verbal and written abuse of Vietnamese people (*Viet-Luan*, 17 Aug, 1990:64), the local councils’ lack of use of Vietnamese language at public festivals (*Chuong Saigon*, 16 Feb, 1990:20,21) and of landlords discrimination towards Vietnamese tenants (*Chuong Saigon* 21 July,1992: 12). In general, Vietnamese language newspapers are not afraid to expose racism towards Vietnamese people. On one occasion a Sydney Vietnamese newspaper overstepped the line when it falsely accused local police of shooting a Vietnamese youth (*Nhan Quyen*, 5 April, 1990:46). The next day they were asked to publish a retraction of the statement, and did so.

In the mainstream press there are many incidences of blatantly anti-Vietnamese reporting of Vietnamese related news. In the *Age* (29 April, 1994:p8) in the report entitled ‘How the West was won by Asian migrants’, the owner of the Marconi Italian cake shop in Cabramatta, which had just closed after 20 years, commented when referring to Vietnamese people in the area, ‘They are like a cancer these people’. In an article about the Vietnamese gang 5T in Sydney, the founder and
president of ‘Enough is enough anti-violence movement’, Ken Marslew, said, ‘People are worried in Cabramatta that they have an ethnic group trying to take over, and going and terrorising other ethnic groups’ (Canberra Times, 8th October, 1995:2). From speaking about the Vietnamese gang, a generalisation was made about ‘an ethnic group trying to take over’, the inference being that this was part of a campaign of violence on the part of Vietnamese to control the suburb. Another report about the Asianisation of the Western suburbs in the Sydney Morning Herald (12 Nov, 1988:31) was headlined ‘The Wild West’ (Figure 13), and reported on Indochinese gangs in Western Sydney. The area is not only felt to be made dangerous by Vietnamese people but is also thought of as being physically unappealing because of their presence. For example, an article mentioned earlier in the Sydney Morning Herald after John Newman’s murder investigation began, ‘Cabramatta is simultaneously the fulfilment of our migration dream and its nightmarish conclusion. An amalgam of poverty and prosperity, marked by high-rise flats with laundry-draped balconies, it is a dazzling collision between Australian suburban ugliness and South-East Asian big city garishness’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 7 September, 1994:8).

Vietnamese people are therefore not only portrayed as acceptable only when they ‘assimilate’ the views and dispositions of the wider Australian society, but are also portrayed as contributing to making Australian suburban life more difficult and unattractive. Here again the body metaphor is used to describe the pristine nature of the Australian suburb in danger of being polluted by the Vietnamese presence. The media representations of the invasion of space by Vietnamese is countered in the Vietnamese press by a plea for fair representation.

The Vietnamese language press

The Vietnamese language press to a large degree reflect the views of the Vietnamese Community Organisation and therefore frequently carries political messages. The Organisation has three main aims as stressed publicly on many occasions. These aims have also been stated to me by leaders within the Organisation itself. These aims are:
1. To actively voice disapproval of the Communist regime in Vietnam and to activate for change towards a democracy
2. To attempt to resolve the problem of Vietnamese refugees, now numbering 40,000, still languishing in South-East Asian refugee camps
and 3. To work for the welfare of the Vietnamese community in Australia
The Vietnamese language press reflects these three aims. The newspapers do carry Australian news but also carry news from Vietnam, news about the refugee problem in South-East Asia, and finally news about community events and activities. Prominent are the articles that support an anti-communist stance. For example, when a letter was sent to the Sydney-based Vietnamese newspaper, Chuong Saigon (21 July, 1989: 12), to urge the paper to stop publishing anti-communist and anti-Vietnamese government news, the letter was published in the paper. The unknown authors were referred to as ‘the agents of Vietnamese communism in Australia’. The editors vowed that, ‘no matter how high the price is, we will continue to fulfil our responsibility as a newspaper, and will unmask Vietnamese communists and their agents’. In a similar vein an article in Nhan-Quyen (16 November, 1989) asserted that a return to Vietnam was dangerous by stating that

‘..most Vietnamese who return to Vietnam as tourists are being blackmailed by the Communist regime. They are forced to sign documents admitting to having had agreed to work for the Vietnamese communist spying or secret police service in Australia. These documents are kept for possible disclosures in the future to ensure compliance by the victims to the whims of the Communists, the article surmises. Two Vietnamese youths from Cabramatta had been arrested on drummed up charges of stealing a few dogs while on a visit to their old town. This must serve as a lesson to those who still believe in the communist propaganda.’

In Viet-Luan (25 April, 1989) an article went further in denouncing the return of Vietnamese people to Vietnam by stating,

‘Representatives of the Captive Nations Council said that former Vietnamese refugees who trade with Communist Vietnam and return there as tourists should be treated as spies and punished with the strongest possible measures by the Australian government. They were not genuine refugees. Their assets must be confiscated. Australia should open her arms to genuine refugees languishing in camps in Asia’ (p.3).

In the Saigon News(25 Jan, 1991:7) an article urged resistance to the Hanoi regime, and read,

‘Two support committees for a resistance movement against the Vietnamese communist authorities have been formed among Vietnamese living in Victoria and South Australia. 300 people attended a meeting in Melbourne during which a six member committee and a
support network were created to support the Frontline Force for the Liberation of Vietnam (FFLV) both in human and financial resources. The leader of the FFLV, a former brigadier general of the South Vietnamese army, recently visited Vietnamese communities throughout Australia. The FFLV is a military group operating in the border area of Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia.

The attack on communism is thus threefold: to reprimand those within the Vietnamese communities in Australia for suspected communist sympathies, to warn people about the danger of return to Vietnam, and finally, to wage a war of resistance against the communist regime.

The political nature of much reporting in the Vietnamese language press also enters into the reports of social unrest within the Vietnamese communities. In a Nhan-Quyen article (9 November, 1989:7), a story appeared in which politics and criminality were intermingled. It read,

'A 22 year old addict has been found guilty of armed robbery against his own people. The court had dismissed his defence that he had acted in the name of Vietnamese resistance to communism. The case was typical among families split up during their escape from Vietnam, with many youths being unable to resist the temptations of a pessimistic society. The case should be a lesson to all that disrepute should not be brought to the community by using noble causes as excuses for crimes.'

Here, the political credentials of the newspaper are apparent, and therefore ensure wide readership particularly by those within the community organisations. Huong, a Vietnamese woman living in Sydney, commented to me on the Vietnamese press. Her views were similar to many other readers with whom I have spoken,

*I always read these newspapers. Sometimes I read one for a few months, sometimes another one. But a lot of articles I just skim over. Some of them are ludicrous, asking everyone to have some sort of armed struggle in Vietnam, or backstabbing people in the community, saying really rude and insulting things. But it is still good to read in Vietnamese, and to see what is happening in Vietnam, and if there are any events in the community here, like Vietnamese singers coming from the States, or Moon festival celebrations or things like that. The ads are good too, you can find out where to get certain foods we like, or things like Vietnamese tax agents. I just forget all about the grandstanding of
the Vietnamese Community leaders – they often seem to use the newspapers for themselves to show how important they are.

The many dimensions of the Vietnamese language press are apparent in Huong’s words. What is also apparent is how, whether all the articles are read or not, the Vietnamese language press is involved in the creation of cohesion through stressing anti-communist norms. Like its mainstream counterparts these newspapers are also involved in promoting stereotypical images of Vietnamese migrants.

Discussion

The relatively recent arrival of Vietnamese-Australians and their locations in relatively few areas of our cities have mitigated against the possibility of much social interaction between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. The images of the Vietnam War as well as the earliest media stereotypes of Vietnamese people arriving in Australia assisted in constructing Vietnamese people in homogeneous and static formations that marked their otherness and their transgressive possibilities. These representations as well as the absence of much personal contact with majority culture had, has led to contemporary images of, and attitudes towards Vietnamese migrants as dangerous and corrupting. For most non-Vietnamese, knowledge of Vietnamese Australians, and in particular perceptions of the characteristics of the ethnic identity of the Vietnamese, is based upon media images because of the minimal and circumscribed nature of much interaction. However, newspaper representations continue to mark out and create specific forms of difference. The media representations of Vietnamese have almost all come to portray the stereotype of Vietnamese as violent, as victims, or as acceptable only when appropriating Australian mainstream values which deny their ethnicity.

The Vietnamese press, while attempting to secure for its readership a sense of control and empowerment, is often overtly political, as well as being a promoter of immutable and uniform images of Vietnamese people in exile. While the mainstream press images the Vietnamese as spatially intrusive and destructive within Australian spaces, the Vietnamese press is often making a plea to its readers to turn their focus of attention beyond Australia, to the past in Vietnam, and to a new and different future in that country. Both the mainstream press and its Vietnamese counterpart
thus operate to mark Vietnamese people as being spatially oriented to specific locations. The mainstream press constructs Vietnamese as ghettoised with all the attributes that the term encodes, while the Vietnamese press constructs ongoing associations with the imagined homeland along with images of unchanging difference.
Chapter 7

Status and place

In this chapter I examine the social mobility of Vietnamese in Australia in spatial terms, indicating that a rise in status within the Vietnamese community is marked by people moving into different areas of cities that are not defined as Vietnamese. I will here discuss the process by which people differentiate themselves socially, and how one can observe the spatial ramifications of such a shift of status.

When Van was telling me about his arrival in Australia I was struck by the links he made between status and place. He said,

_I had been a high school teacher in Vietnam, and in Vietnam teachers are very highly thought of. People really respect them, never questioning them, giving them gifts. I really had a good life and wasn’t too involved in the war either. My wife and I had our son in Vietnam during the war. I just kept teaching although I taught privately more and more because I had good English. And after ’75, my whole family suffered because one of my two brothers was in the airforce, and my mother used to do laundry for an American firm. It was also just terrible living in Vietnam after that. Not only did they treat my family badly but they moved us out of our home because it was big, and they put three northern cadres in it. The northerners treated us with no respect. I lost my job because they wanted all the people in the south to be taught propaganda. But I still saw my old students secretly to teach them English so they could escape. I didn’t really think it was possible for our family but people kept telling me, you speak English, you should leave, there is no future here for you. So I found out how to do it. I thought I would go first, and get my wife and the rest of the family later, after I got to America. ...It was 1979 and there were so many people leaving that the camps (in Asia)were crowded with people after their boat trips. I hadn’t thought of Australia as a place to settle until then but the Australian Government accepted me quickly from the camp because of speaking English. But when I got to Australia, what a shock. I was nothing. No-one respected me, even Vietnamese people._

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And Australians were actually rude. If I told them I was a teacher they would say ‘That’s nothing here, you have to get an Australian qualification and then it means something’. But I thought to myself I want to rise above this, and I worked and worked to get my family out. When they came my wife and I studied and worked together. We got a house and then we kept wanting to move out of western Sydney. There were a lot of uneducated Vietnamese people coming. We finally moved here to Strathfield and we have a nice house and both have good jobs in the government, and now people respect us more. It’s still not like being a teacher in Vietnam but people will talk to me and listen and show respect.

The social mobility of Vietnamese in Australia is thus often manifested in a spatial dimension, with people moving into different areas of cities that are not defined as Vietnamese. I will here examine the process by which people differentiate themselves socially, and how one can observe the spatial ramifications of such a shift of status. The status of people within the Vietnamese communities of Australia is related to how they were situated socially within Vietnam. In many ways those that had the most to lose when the communists reunited the country were the ones most likely to leave. Therefore, it is those who were in elite southern society who are more likely to hold on to the values of the pre-war Vietnam as they perceived their loss as being very great. It is often more difficult for those individuals or families to appease the turmoil of their past separation from Vietnam.

**Occupation, education and class**

The Vietnamese in Australia are mostly very aware of class differences and place a great deal of emphasis on titles, educational background and family names. When speaking of the past in Vietnam beyond living memory many people refer to the categorisation of men into four loosely defined occupations. These were the scholarly class (nhat si), the farmers (nhi nong), the craftsmen (tam cong), and the traders (tu thuong). These occupational roles also defined status even though all were accorded respect. The rural workers were always felt to be particularly valued for their role as food producers. Whether these divisions were ever clearly defined in historical times is difficult to determine, although it is apparent that the scholarly class were perceived to be an elite group. Armies were formed out of the class of farmers, who would move between working their land and fighting as soldiers (Nguyen Dinh-Hoa, 1988:9). The following often-quoted expression expresses the
status accorded scholars, but also emphasises the appreciation of the worth of farmers. *Nhat si nhi nong, het gao chay rong, nhat nong nhi si,* –‘The scholars are rated first and then the farmers, but when there is famine, the farmer is rated first and then the scholar’ (ibid). Almost all refugees arrived to be categorised by the broader Australian community as being at the same level, with no material wealth and their Vietnamese qualifications unrecognised. They arrived without the trappings of success or achievement.

Ha was a doctor in Vietnam, trained at the Saigon medical school. When he arrived in Australia with his wife and three children in 1980 he was too concerned to support his family to retrain in medicine. After working as an unskilled factory worker, he eventually, in the late 1980s retrained as a computer technician as did his wife, Kim. He says of his experience,

*I found it a very humbling experience arriving here with nothing at all except my family. I was so happy to be away from the terrible conditions in Vietnam that at first it didn’t matter. But now, fifteen years since I came here I still feel as if I lost a lot of my confidence coming here. People in the Vietnamese community know I was a doctor, but what does it matter when I am unable to treat people. It’s been a long struggle even to get a reasonable job, and get the best education for our children. We will never have a really nice house. I feel I gave up my position in Vietnam for my children and I spend a lot of time and effort in their education. They can achieve what we could not here. They have every opportunity.*

Vietnamese people in Australia frequently believe that university education is the only way of obtaining power for people in a minority group. The only accomplishment and achievement is through education, and then only university education. Marr, one of the foremost historians and commentators of Vietnam states that,

‘Tradition has bequeathed most young men and women a respect for teachers second only to their fathers, a near reverence for the written word, and the assumption that those among them who memorise large quantities of data, achieve top marks, and receive diplomas or degrees, will be honoured with high social status’ (1996:14).

Having a university education in particular honours the family and accords them high level of prestige. One of the greatest difficulties facing Vietnamese students is thus their frequent inability to realise their parent's aspirations. The suicide rate
among the Vietnam-born is twice as high as Australian-born people (Viet-Luan, 27 July 1990:14-15). Several Vietnamese people have mentioned to me that the number of suicides may be attributed to men who are unable to obtain status after their settlement in Australia. That women do not seem to have the same difficulties will be examined in Chapter 10.

The desire for a university education has its roots in colonial Vietnam as well as with the Confucian tradition of respecting scholars. In colonial Vietnam, the French restricted education to only a handful of educated elites who, for the most part, worked alongside the colonists. Some men I spoke to felt that education was the key to power and felt that this had been denied them in Vietnam, under communism. One man told me,

_The communists always let us know – When you're educated you have knowledge that will stop us from controlling you, and you're one of the people who could start a revolution against us, against the government, the Communist party._

During the Vietnam War, the Army gave status, there was little possibility for job mobility, and a job was mostly for life. For many, the end of years of fighting was a difficult adjustment. There are many former Vietnamese military officers in Australia who often continue to see themselves as military personnel. For many Vietnamese a soldier is a soldier for life with no feeling of purpose in Australia. For some, their children are encouraged to carry on the task of political change in Vietnam. The period of one’s youth in Vietnam was often seen as a time of heroism and pursuit of ideals. Young men often have the desire to go back to Vietnam and to join the resistance movement against communism in their country, or to join the military in Australia. This desire expresses the wish to reconnect with their past and to follow their parents’ fight.

Many older men join the Vietnamese Community Organisation to replace the feeling of status and power attached to military life. Others prefer to forget the past. Nghi, for example, who was in the South Vietnamese Army, says,

_I decided to just forget about all of that when I came here. It seemed pointless to keep thinking about the war. I just wanted to get a good life for my children here. I miss Vietnam a lot and really try to keep my_

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56 Marr (1996:3) says, for example, 'Bursts of political activism by Vietnamese youth changed the course of history in the August 1945 Revolution and in the 1963-66 Buddhist and student struggle movement in Vietnam'.
children Vietnamese, but I cannot understand how so many men who were fighting for the south keep fighting that war here. A lot of them get into the community organisations and try to be important. And they can only get in by showing that they hate communism, and that they fought it. I think it's really pointless. We have our church friends (Vietnamese Baptist Church) and that's who we stay with. I don't mix with the military people at all.

Although Nghi was not involved with community organisations he was part of an organised network of Vietnamese Baptists. For those who are involved with other military men, the relationship between the community organisation and the state replicates the relationship the South Vietnamese Army had with the Americans and allies during the Vietnam War. Thus Vietnamese ex-military men often feel comfortable with the relationship of lobbying politicians and protecting their community, for example. The focus of the Americans in Vietnam was on political structures and military hardware rather than on an understanding of Vietnamese cultural values. Likewise the community organisations do not attempt to spread information on Vietnamese cultural life to other Australians but rather to gain power in the political environment of state and federal politics, lobbying for money and a voice in decisions that may affect their community.

**Status differentiation**

In Vietnam, in principle, people could move between occupations, and change social classes. The prime reason why this rarely occurred was the family oriented occupation patterns and because education remained only open to the elite who could afford the prohibitive costs. One aspect of the Vietnamese state that has ramifications for the way that overseas Vietnamese imagine space outside of Vietnam is that the Vietnamese state after 1975 fixed them in space by restricting their movement. The issuing of residence cards means that it is difficult to change one’s place of abode unless one marries someone from another place within Vietnam. To maintain control of the population, control of movement is essential. As soon as there is a free movement of information, people and consumer products and services, the system of centralised control must erode. By contrast, the unrestrained movement of consumer items, information and people both within and across national boundaries is emblematic of capitalism (Friedland & Boden, 1994:12).

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57 Many other communist states also controlled the movements of citizens (see Friedland & Boden, 1994:12).
1994:12). The freedom of movement in Australia has allowed many Vietnamese people to move house frequently. As they become more financially secure, they buy better and better houses and move out of Vietnamese neighbourhoods. Spatial movement here reflects increasing social differentiation - as Vietnamese people become wealthier they can afford to mark out their houses in a way that differentiates themselves from others.

In Vietnam, it was frequently an ideal for a couple, when marrying, to be compatible in terms of their social prestige. The concern with having equal status was expressed in the proverb, *mon dang ho doi*, ‘compatible gates, compatible houses’. Here, in Australia, social equality between Vietnamese marriage partners is often expressed through the equality of their wealth and housing. Mai’s marriage to Daniel in 1994 reflected these values clearly. Mai is Catholic and she works as a social worker. Mai’s parents are 1954 northerners who are still in Vietnam. Daniel is an accountant and his father, a southerner, held a high military position in the south. Unlike Mai, both Daniel’s parents are living in Sydney. Although both in their early twenties, Mai and Daniel both owned their own houses, and lived separately from the rest of their family. Mai told me that she felt they were both really compatible because they had the same goals for the future. She was impressed that Daniel, like her, had already invested in a house, and so she felt they had begun their relationship on an equal footing in material terms. Their parents had never met but all the other relatives, particularly older brothers and sisters told me how they felt this was an ideal match. They were felt to be at the same ‘level’, determined by what they achieved educationally and materially in Australia, not in Vietnam. The couple originated from different regions in Vietnam, their parents were at different occupational and educational levels, and they had different religions. Even though Daniel’s family were Buddhist, the couple had a Catholic ceremony and had already decided to bring up their children as Catholics. Religious cleavages occur throughout the community, but nevertheless people across different religions continue to have active social networks and many intermarry. Although not so in Mai and Daniel’s case, it is still rather common for people to marry within their own region; North, Central, or Southern Vietnam. The ‘1954 northerners’ also tend to marry other people with a 1954 northern background. The most marginalised group are the recently arrived northerners, mostly from camps in Hong Kong. There are also some northerners who deserted the Army in Cambodia, usually in the mid 1980s, and who also came here as refugees.
For the displaced Vietnamese the need for belonging is profound and the presence of a Vietnamese community may assist in mitigating the extreme social and political alienation that many feel. Because of the need to present themselves as a cohesive community many of the political divisions do not surface publicly. The anti-communist networks present the most dominant representation of political allegiance and have the most power in the organisational aspects of the community. The strongest opposition to this group comes from those who define themselves as 'moderates'. Most of this group do not wish to oppose the communist government and wish to be involved in a dialogue between the Hanoi regime and the overseas Vietnamese in order to assist their compatriots back in their homeland. At the other end of the spectrum of political views, there are some who support the regime and accept its legitimacy. These individuals have not formed a coherent group and usually do not publicly vocalise their opinions because they are aware of the different political views held by the majority of Vietnamese. Presenting a united front is very important for the majority of people. In the Saigon News (9 August, 1991:2-6), an article mentioned that three Vietnamese candidates had put themselves forward for the local government elections,

'The author warns that all three may lose because the Vietnamese community votes will be divided...The author calls on those without the means and status to ensure success to withdraw so other candidates may have a better chance'.

Here, no matter how diverse the experiences of Vietnamese people are, public unity is seen as a more effective way of obtaining power in the wider political arena. This sense of belonging is frequently expressed through participation in community organisations. One of the principal means of obtaining prestige within the Vietnamese community is to attain a public profile either in politics, business, or within the Vietnamese Community Organisations. As the leaders of the Vietnamese Community Organisations meet and liaise with heads of government departments, with welfare bodies, and with politicians, the membership of such organisations can also make people feel important as they represent the broader Vietnamese population of Australia, and they are usually viewed as being important by the mainstream government and political bodies. Vietnamese elites thus compete as welfare mediators as well as to obtain places in the bureaucracy.

Vietnamese people are continually confronted with the problem of how to represent themselves to the majority culture as well as how to connect with others in their 'imagined community'. Through Tet and other festivals and ceremonies, the
Vietnamese community organisations act as the principle negotiators between the community and local government organisations. These community organisations guide the cultural and political life of the community and so have a profound impact upon the continuous formulations of Vietnamese identities. Although the Vietnamese language press to a large extent voices the opinions of these community leaders, they also present the views of vocal opponents of individuals of prominence. For example, in Chuong Saigon (24 April, 1992:43) an article stated that Sydney had become the centre of power of Vietnamese-Australians – the ‘Vietnamese political capital’. The paper cites proof of this claim by the fact that all the then current leaders of the national Vietnamese organisations were based in Sydney. Seven of twelve Vietnamese language newspapers are published in Sydney. However, the article also stated that Sydney is also the playground of ‘pimps’ who only want to ‘make money and not remember their political refugee status’ (ibid). Vietnamese leaders in Sydney and Melbourne often vie for social prestige as a group, the Melbourne group often claiming that they are the intellectual cohort of Vietnamese in Australia, whereas the Sydney group are viewed as being more political, militaristic and materialist.

Although exact figures are difficult to ascertain, from the families I know, I found that more than half were either members of, or had an interest in, the Vietnamese Community Association of Australia. The leadership of the group have always been representatives of those who held positions of power in Vietnam before 1975. Of these the most successful at attaining leadership roles are those who fought against the communist regime. Thus, former southern military leaders are the most likely to gain votes, partly because their resistance against communism cannot be questioned. Other high status individuals who may gain office are those who were in prominent government positions in the southern government, or the educated elite who have always been a respected group in Vietnamese society. Usually those who were employed by the southern regime or by its allies had already had experience at dealing with non-Vietnamese as well as expertise in bureaucratic procedures. Both

Most Vietnamese-born intellectuals in Australia were either Colombo Plan scholars, or arrived soon after 1975. They are often French-speaking and many had trained in France prior to 1975. The divisions between Sydney and Melbourne in mainstream intellectual traditions prior to 1974 has been documented by Docker (1974). The Melbourne intellectual tradition, which placed intellectuals at the centre of society and often involved them in the public gaze may well have attracted Vietnamese intellectuals more than the Sydney tradition, which at the time was a more bohemian, anti-authoritarian grouping. Clearly, since that period these traditions have been fragmented, but most Vietnamese-trained intellectuals remained in Melbourne.
these groups easily become established as intermediaries between the state and the Vietnamese communities.

While those who had positions of authority in south Vietnam prior to the communist takeover would seem to have the expertise or education to enable them to become brokers between Vietnamese people and the institutions of the state there are other reasons why they may be tempted to take on community leadership roles. The arrival of the communists in Saigon 1975 signalled for many the overthrow of all the familiar political and economic structures. This collapse was more profoundly felt by those members of society who lost power, prestige, and economic resources. For almost all southerners life became difficult because of the fear and uncertainty surrounding the actions of the new government, the nationwide economic plight and also because of lack of freedom of speech and movement. For some, life was not radically altered and many rural people were able to continue farming their land. For those who lost power, however, life was turned upside down. Many were sent to re-education camps and suffered continued humiliations. This loss of legitimacy was so deeply felt that many escaped the country with the conviction that to regain their dignity they must both fight the communist regime and re-produce their former lives elsewhere. Military and professional men are able to satisfy their need for the restoration of the social and political life that existed in the south by taking on the role of community leaders and mediators between their communities and those outside. Most community leaders are also motivated to assist fellow Vietnamese in dealing with the majority culture, although often within a paternalistic framework, repeating the social relationships in which they participated in Vietnam. The degree of incorporation into Australian social and political life of this leading group is thus paradoxically predicated in part upon a memorialisation of their former social position and lifestyle in Vietnam.

As the Vietnamese community co-exists with a large non-Vietnamese population it is worthwhile examining the relationships between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. Vietnamese people may rise in status, but they often sense that they are always lowly in the eyes of mainstream society as indicated by informants’ comments above. So, even if the success of a Vietnamese person is reported in the press the images and text frequently perpetuate a standardised and uniform image of ‘the Vietnamese’. It has been suggested to me by Vietnamese people that, while many Australians will willingly show generosity and benevolence towards migrants and refugees, this is only apparent when Vietnamese people are self-effacing and
appear to be in need. As soon as they become prosperous or distinguish themselves in any way, there is often animosity and indignation (also see Pittman, 1993:32). The difficulty in ‘succeeding’ in Australia is often expressed publicly. For example, after John Newman’s death in 1994, when Vietnamese people were prime suspects, Phuong Canh Ngo, a Fairfield councillor was put under intense public scrutiny. He commented, ‘I am becoming very doubtful that an Asian can really succeed in this community’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 22 October, 1994:5). That is, the definitions of an individual are always framed by the hegemonic culture (see comments by McCall, Burnley, & Encel, 1985:13). Although Vietnamese relate to non-Vietnamese on many different levels, in institutions, schools, shops and as neighbours, they rarely form close attachments. Social interaction is often quite formal except where there is intermarriage. Attitudes about non-Vietnamese Australians are also perceived as being class-based within the Vietnamese community. Vietnamese people who perceive themselves as the urban elite do seem to be more at ease with moving within the non-Vietnamese world. They often blame the fear and distrust engendered by the corrupt and difficult times in Vietnam for the fact that many of their countrymen are struggling here.

Many Vietnamese are seriously underemployed considering their previous education and employment, as was indicated recently by a study of Vietnamese unemployment by Griffith University (Viviani, Coughlan and Rowland, 1993). This echoes the theme of a decline in occupational status expressed by many Vietnamese. The family economy and the sharing of information and resources within family and friendship networks is an important means by which Vietnamese people may contend with the precariousness nature of employment and income (see Kibria, 1989). The economies at work among the Vietnamese in Australia are varied but often follow similar patterns. In spite of extremely high rates of unemployment among this group, as explained earlier the rate of home ownership is higher than for any other group. The way in which Vietnamese people are able to own their own home depends upon their own resources and the social group they move within. As was shown in the comments of informants above, people may insist that they buy houses for their children, however, it appears that they buy houses not for the material benefit of their children, but very often for status. There are certain prestige areas of housing for Vietnamese and once they buy a house they will usually continue to move into better and better houses and to better suburbs. The Vietnamese notions of a high status suburb is that they are generally distant from Cabramatta, Marrickville or other ‘Vietnamese’ areas. Most people feel that they
came to Australia with equivalent status as Vietnamese refugees and now is the time to differentiate themselves from other Vietnamese in terms of status and success.

There is a method of obtaining money quickly which most Vietnamese people 'play', called *choi hui* or 'the game of borrowing'. A person who wants to buy something expensive (a car, house, or a wedding, for example) gets together a group of people they can trust (numbering from 4 to 20) and facilitates the game of borrowing. The group meets once per month. At the first meeting the facilitator names the amount that everyone should contribute, say $1000. Everyone gives that person $1000 so the facilitator now has $6000 in cash to buy what they want. Each month a member of the group is chosen to receive the money as they each put in $1000, the facilitator adding a minimal amount of 'interest' to the sum they contribute. The last person to receive the $6000 (plus the 'interest') usually does not want to buy anything but sees the game as a way that induces them to save. They feel pressured by trust and friendship to contribute $1000 each month to the game and get it back at the end of six months. The other people playing have had low-interest loans of varying time frames. Many Vietnamese people play several of these games at once and can thus amass a large amount of cash in a short amount of time. There are, of course, cases where people playing the game of *choi hui* escape with the money but none of the other players appear to have ever gone to the police because they are aware that this game is illegal and is seen by dominant Australian society as gambling. In 1994, a Canberra Vietnamese woman was due to collect the final proceeds of her *choi hui* which was $24,000 in cash when news of this got around. The money was stolen as she returned home from the game. She did not report this to the police and she had to sell her restaurant. The 'game of borrowing' goes part way in explaining how Vietnamese can buy their own home at the same time as indicating a number of their concerns such as their mistrust of banks and government institutions. Their mistrust of institutions arises from their experiences in Vietnam where many people's assets were taken from them by state-owned banks. Vietnamese-Australians not only have the desire to own their own home and to continually upgrade their housing location, but because of *choi hui*, they are able to achieve their wishes in most cases. If they are involved in a social group who are relatively affluent, they will themselves be able to borrow more. Likewise, if their family and social circle is impoverished they may not be able to borrow very much and so are unable to attain consumer items as readily as their wealthier counterparts.

59 See Nguyen Thomas (1993) for a detailed description of the operation of *choi hui*. 157
Here, one’s social circle reinforces one’s location and position, both economically and also within suburban areas.

**Discussion**

The social mobility of Vietnamese in Australia is also in evidence in spatial terms, with people moving into different areas of cities that are not defined as Vietnamese as they become more materially successful. In this section I examined the process by which people differentiate themselves socially, and how one can observe the spatial ramifications of such a shift of status. For many Vietnamese people who had positions of status on Vietnam there is cynicism and covert resistance to authority in Australia, belying the apparent submission or resignation to wider society. Bourdieu (1977:86) has indicated that individuals carry with them dispositions that give them a certain social positioning which they may recognise in others. Here *habitus* is the basis for the sharing of social space between people who occupy certain positions. If we apply this concept to Vietnamese elites in Australia, it is clear that the different relations of power between different groups of Vietnamese and between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese are reproduced through the collective history of the different groups. The collective history of elites within the Vietnamese diaspora means that they tend to work as powerbrokers between the organs of the state and other Vietnamese, however they often want to be considered separate from other Vietnamese and position themselves in non-Vietnamese locations and workplaces.
Chapter 8

Touring places and spaces

In this chapter I pose questions about the relationships between globalisation, tourism to Vietnam and to the ‘little Saigons’ of Australia’s urban landscape. I analyse several forms of movement between places and the way that these travels unravel spatial meaning. I then further develop the argument that spatial references are enmeshed in communal life. An examination of several forms of movement between places and the way that these travels unravel spatial meaning will help to uncover some of the spatial references that are enmeshed in the lives of Vietnamese Australians. Vietnamese people themselves engage in international travel primarily to Vietnam, but also frequently travel to visit relatives and friends in other parts of the diaspora, particularly in the United States and France. The other important forms of tourism relating to Vietnamese spaces are the trips taken by non-Vietnamese to Vietnam and to the Vietnamese areas of our largest cities, the most popular site being Cabramatta.

Visiting Vietnam

Return trips to Vietnam by overseas Vietnamese are a very frequent topic of conversation among Vietnamese-Australian families. In 1994, 1 in every 5 Vietnam-born Australians returned home to Vietnam to visit. This extraordinarily high rate of return is partly due to the fact that prior to about 1989, very few Vietnamese felt like taking what was perceived as a high risk in returning to their country because they had heard rumours of persecution and retribution waged upon Viet kieu 60. The opening up of the country and the policy of economic renovation along with the engagement of Vietnam in warmer foreign relations in the international arena have meant that overseas Vietnamese have been returning to Vietnam in large numbers since about 1991. Most had spent more than ten years out of the country and so their return is always a dramatic reminder of a past left behind in the clouds of memory. Vietnamese people have, by definition, travelled, and have an acute understanding of difference – encounters with colonialism and the American war in Vietnam made them encounter the foreign very frequently in the past. However,

60 Viet kieu means ‘overseas Vietnamese’.
unless forced by external circumstances, the main reason for travel by Vietnamese people in Vietnam was to visit relatives. Likewise, in Australia, this constitutes the major reason for travelling. A journey to Vietnam will frequently unravel questions that a Vietnamese-Australian person may have about their identity and their past, about where they ‘belong’. Where all Vietnamese in Australia had made the trip in the opposite direction, often under extreme duress, the return journey presents a moment to reflect on loss. Huy tells of his experience,

*I had never thought of going home until a few years ago and when I knew that it was possible I started thinking about Vietnam in a different way. I started to imagine that I could even live there again. But when I took the trip I finally understood first hand how I could never live there. Of course I love my homeland. But I just felt so far apart and had stopped having the typical Vietnamese responses to things. I felt that my individuality would be stifled there. I felt Australian much more than I ever did in Australia. Somehow when I am in Australia I don’t recognise how much I have changed but in Vietnam, it becomes really clear. And in Vietnam I am viewed differently, as a Viet kieu who has another nationality. Going back really helped me to see where I was exactly and where I wanted to be.*

Huy’s story reveals the extent to which return becomes a narrative in which difference is experienced along with the loss entailed in separation from homeland. This critical distance accentuates the changes that migration has wrought upon Vietnamese migrants. At the same time the notion of diaspora is one that challenges place-bound identity, by unifying experience across continents and making connections in a range of places. Here, identity lies in a shared history of fleeing. Trinh T. Minh Ha (1994:14) writes that identity, ‘lies at the intersection of dwelling and travelling and is a claim of continuity within discontinuity (and vice-versa)”61. Travel back to the homeland can be a process of preserving a reference point and of maintaining normality in a new social environment.

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61 Carter (1992) extends this point. He writes, ‘An authentically migrant perspective would, perhaps, be based on an intuition that the opposition between here and there is itself a cultural construction, a consequence of thinking in terms of fixed entities and defining them oppositionally. It might begin by regarding movement, not as an awkward interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but as a mode of being in the world. The question would be, then, not how to arrive, but how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to notate such events, how to give them a historical and social value’ (1992:101).
Vietnamese-Australians also engage in travel within Australia. Although most people travel interstate to visit relatives, there are other reasons for travel which are also important. Following the political concerns of the Vietnamese Community Organisation, busloads of Vietnamese-born people travel to Canberra every 30th April, the anniversary of the fall of Saigon, in order to protest against the communist regime and make appeals for human rights outside the Vietnamese Embassy in O'Malley, Canberra. Whenever Vietnamese communist party political leaders have visited Canberra, there is also a protest organised outside Parliament House with many thousands of Vietnam-born protesters. Other reasons to travel interstate include recreational ones, such as for holidays or for gambling. Until a large casino opened in Sydney, the Casino in Canberra attracted many Vietnamese people every weekend.

The directionality of international travel and the flows across boundaries depends on the starting point, which is determined by international politics and history. In general, refugees and migrants move from periphery to the West, and Westerners cross boundaries to the developing world as tourists, or to give aid, military assistance, or to advise. Australian and Vietnamese businesspeople and those attached to the government are visiting Vietnam in increasing numbers, the former to create and maintain business links, the latter to work, to offer advice, to write reports, or to carry out projects. Former Australian soldiers who fought in Vietnam also make return trips to Vietnam, to reminisce, to deal with the trauma of their previous visit, to help villagers where they were stationed, or to meet with other military personnel from Vietnam, America or Australia. The recent marketing of Vietnam for tourists has had the effect of revisioning overseas Vietnamese as inauthentic custodians of culture. One recently returned non-Vietnamese tourist to Vietnam told me that he now found Cabramatta disappointing, that he used to enjoy it, but since going to Vietnam, finds the suburb more like Hong Kong than Vietnam.

Vietnamese people living in Australia have often found the new interest in Vietnam unpalatable, considering their own histories and fraught relationship with the country (see Chapter 11). Some have reported that they have noticed a sudden interest in them from non-Vietnamese Australians, some of whom have attempted to use them as a tourist resource, assuming that they can suggest the ‘untouched’

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62 In 1995 over one million tourists visited Vietnam, twenty three percent of these were Overseas Vietnamese (Information obtained from Vietnamese Embassy in Canberra).
regions of their country that the tourists may travel to. Nga, who has not returned to Vietnam since her initial departure, mentioned to me that in a new twist of imperialism, non-Vietnamese have informed her about her country and have taken the place for themselves. Many Vietnamese experience the new interest in their country by tourists an appropriation of their homeland into a leisure commodity. The competitive claiming of spatial knowledge as well the contesting of authentic Vietnameseness is under continuing negotiation as Vietnam claims a place in the Asian tourism market.

Movement within Australia

The packaging of Cabramatta as a tourist destination has allowed it to become what Appurduurai (1996:45) calls a 'translocality', a place where the flow of goods and diversity and movement of the population positions it simultaneously as part of the nation-state and as separated from it. This positioning explains partly why media attention on Cabramatta questions the allegiance of its inhabitants to Australia and to the values and norms that predominate. Likewise, the transnational loyalties of religions frequently unsettle the notion of a coherent and identifiable locality. The physical presence of temples and pagodas visibly manifest the allegiance to formations that are non-state63. Cabramatta thus has the ability to allure, and to unsettle tourists.

The tourism within Australian cities has a profound impact on the positioning of Vietnamese people across a racial divide. Cabramatta is being consciously marketed as a multicultural village but it is generally viewed as ‘Little Saigon’, or ‘Vietnamatta’ by most who live outside the area. Local government in the Fairfield area has actively sought to ‘Asianise’ the public spaces of Cabramatta through construction of the Freedom Gate in Cabramatta, the placement of Asian sculptures along the street, and bylaws such as one passed in 198964 which forced developers to decorate all new buildings in the Cabramatta shopping area with oriental facades. The area has come to have an exhibition value relatively recently. A survey of tourism in Cabramatta indicated that most tourists go there to partake in ‘exotic’ Asian cultures, to buy cheap food and merchandise, and to ‘look’ (Fairfield Council Papers, 1994:7). Pamphlets promoting Cabramatta also emphasise the possibilities

64 1989 Development Control Plan (DCP 89).
to gaze upon difference and to bring the essence of 'travel' within a national space.

A very common recent phenomenon is that non-Vietnamese people from all over Sydney go there to buy drugs. So on the one hand Cabramatta has become a spectacle for gratification and on the other a market place for drugs that reinforces attitudes about Asian violence and criminality. A Vietnamese woman who owns a shop that sells materials in Cabramatta told me,

*Anglos sometimes come in here and ask me for drugs. This makes me very sad – I am an old woman. Why do they think that every Vietnamese sells drugs? Most people come here to Cabramatta because they think they can get a bargain. They are always trying to fight me down on the price. They don’t think they should pay normal prices in a Vietnamese shop, and if we sell them for normal prices - they often speak under their breath that we try to cheat them. They want it to be cheap here so that Vietnamese people will remain poor. That’s what I think.*

This woman expressed the view that non-Vietnamese can be defending their spaces against change and transformation by supporting the ghettoisation of certain suburbs.

Cabramatta is also a reminder of the link between Australia and the rest of the world, the connections between the far and the near. It does this by reminding people of the migrant cultures of Australia and also provides people with food and goods such as music and clothes from other parts of the world. It creates Vietnamese as ‘foreigners’ within their country. It may be helpful to examine the notion of foreignness with some words of Sarup (1994:101-2);

‘Strangers are in principle undecidables. They are unclassifiable. A stranger is someone who refuses to remain confined to the ‘far away’ land or go away from our own. S/he is physically close while remaining culturally remote. Strangers often seem to be suspended in the empty space between a tradition which they have already left and the mode of life which stubbornly denies them the right of entry. The stranger blurs a boundary line. The stranger is an anomaly, standing between the inside and the outside, order and chaos, friend and enemy’.

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65For further elaboration of this concept, see Cook and Crang(1996:136).
So at one moment the Vietnamese world of Cabramatta may be peripheral and marginal and in the next moment may be defined as a global suburb reflecting changes in the international arena, blending and mixing cultures. Globalisation has produced what Henri Lefebvre has described as ‘interchangeable space’ (1991, discussed in Yaeger, 1996:20). Where in the past commodities moved over the world stage, now space itself has become exchanged (ibid), so that one may find similar ‘little Saigons’ throughout the western world, suburbs positioned in western cities in parallel forms. Likewise, areas in Vietnamese cities are moving into networks of global spatial exchange (nearly identical roadways, vehicles, buildings, diverse populations, advertising, companies) which are interchangeable with areas in any of the world’s major cities.

Cabramatta is also seen partly as a place where one can see upwardly mobile Asian entrepreneurs in the making. Although other wealthier suburbs of Sydney like Chatswood have a large and successful Chinese population, they are not tourist sites as they are not thought of as being adequately ‘mysterious’. Part of the appeal of Cabramatta is thus its marginality and its untamed quality, as if people have just arrived off the boat, and are still living out their lives primarily in a foreign imagination. This clearly positions Cabramatta in a hierarchy of urban space that defines them in the popular imagination as marginal. The noted geographer Soja writes that one of the most important transformations that is occurring in the postmodern city is ‘the urbanisation of suburbia’ where businesses and administrative centres grow in densely populated areas in the suburbs (Soja, 1995:131). The creation of these cities within cities has meant that tourism within a large city to these smaller cities like Cabramatta gives the impression of travel to a foreign city. Along with these changes in social form come ‘new patterns of social fragmentation, segregation, and polarisation’ (Soja, 1995:133). So the marketing of Cabramatta as a tourist site has the effect of reproducing and accentuating the difference and foreignness of Vietnamese-Australians.

Shopping and eating in Cabramatta is one of the major activities of tourists. Unlike the museum or other primarily visual sites, shopping and dining by tourists provides the possibility of an incorporation and control of the ‘other’ (Curtis and Pajaczkowska, 1994:208). Cabramatta becomes a site for pilgrimage for those in power, for the mainstream, as it reinforces their superiority and the safety in distance. Vietnamese food, a fundamental component of the Vietnamese sense of being ‘at home’ has become removed from them and changed into an exotic repast.
available in an ‘ethnic’ restaurant. In the process of the commodification of ‘ethnic’ food, the social and historical experiences of those who are ‘different’ are objectified and reduced to one of a small number of permissible forms. Here, public displays of difference are sanctioned only when they may provide a multicultural spectacle. These authorised manifestations of diversity are most often presentations of singing, music and dancing, or festivals. As Thompson (1984:45) argues, this form of multiculturalism contracts the enunciation of diversity to the private space of the home. Here, difference can only be public when it is for the gratification of others.

The pleasure in partaking in difference is, however, not straightforward, as Vietnamese food is viewed ambivalently, with both fear and attraction. Several times while eating in Vietnamese restaurants in Cabramatta I asked non-Vietnamese people why they came to Cabramatta. Almost everyone told me that they came because food was so cheap. However, several mentioned that they worried about whether it might be ‘dangerous’ to eat the food in Cabramatta, and expressed fear at catching disease. These fears mirror the fears of the danger of bodily contact with Vietnamese who are frequently viewed as unhealthy and diseased.

Throughout 1995 Cabramatta suffered a loss in the number of tourists visiting. After several boom years in which construction was frenzied and a new restaurant opened almost every month, suddenly businesses began to close. This can be explained by two factors: John Newman’s death, and the rise of drug tourism and associated violence in Cabramatta, both refracted through the lens of the media. Markus Lambert, the promotions officer at Fairfield Council told me, Cabramatta has become a victim of its own success. This aptly describes the result of media interest in the area which fed the image of the danger of Cabramatta, while rarely focussing on positive aspects of the suburb’s transformation. It also mirrors what so many Vietnamese people had told me, that they themselves were punished by this society if they were too successful. This time, the suburb that is marked by their presence suffered the same fate.

Globalisation has created its own spatial dimension. The so-called ‘postmodern city’ is said to reflect pluralism and diversity, and to harbour indeterminacy and transience. That the local and the global are in constant flux can be evidenced in Cabramatta where music, videos, clothes and other consumer items arise from global markets of taste and style but where local ‘norms’ are imposed strongly upon
the plurality and diversity of the area. Globalisation can be thought of as creating a space that urban dwellers all inhabit, as Michel de Certeau (1988) describes it, we all dwell inside a spatial and temporal domain of which it is not possible to speak of an 'outside' and which we cannot claim completely as our own. In the recent Mururoa Atoll French nuclear testing incident, Vietnam and Australia both protested on the international stage. In Vietnam I was told by several Vietnamese people that it was the first time that both the Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diasporic Vietnamese around the Pacific rim felt together on an issue, as if they both inhabited the same space. Globalisation can create links where there were none previously but can also assist in the creation of global hierarchies and inequities.

Discussion

People travel for a multitude of reasons and appear out of their usual locations in numerous places and contexts. Cabramatta may thus be viewed as a place for Vietnamese people to feel comfortable speaking their own language, eating their own food, and participating in their own events. or as a ghetto with all the negative connotations that term suggests, or as a theatre of multiculturalism, a place for cheap food and textiles, or an oasis of difference. Likewise Vietnam may be that left behind, an exotic spectacle, a country harbouring an evil regime, a communist state untouched by materialism, the new Asian economic miracle, or the site of business promise. Both Cabramatta and Vietnam are sites of fear and desire, repulsion and attraction. Migration is in many senses the inverse of tourism, both reflecting different political and class relations. The movement of people across boundaries within cities and nations, and over national boundaries has important ramifications for the creation of transnational identities. These transnational identities span both local and global landscapes. Further, both the Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese populations in Australia are involved in constant construction of place, whether those places are in Cabramatta, the bush, or in Vietnam. The processes involved in the movement of people between places participates in, and often activates, the creation of these constructions.

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Chapter 9

Tet: a critical tale\textsuperscript{66} of diaspora life

Up until now I have been concerned primarily with the activities and actions that occur in the daily life of Vietnamese people. By turning to the public spectacle of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year celebration, I will indicate how such an event may encode power relations within and between communities and present these as desirable, natural and given.

Tet is the biggest celebratory event in the year for Vietnamese people in Vietnam. In the process of migration, Tet has become impregnated with political meanings. It is also a vehicle for the incorporation of Vietnamese people into public life, both as an aesthetic and a political activity. Tet has been chosen as the major event in the Vietnamese Community calendar to enable a gathering of Vietnamese people of all ages, religions and regions in Vietnam, to come together, publicly. Tet, therefore, is a signal, to mainstream society of the Vietnamese presence in Australia, at the same time as it a moment of recollecting Vietnam, as well as being an expression of a political will on the part of the Vietnamese Community Organisation. Where in Vietnam the entire populace is engaged publicly in preparing for Tet, the celebration itself is private and occurs in people's homes. By contrast, in Australia, Tet marks the only public coming together of a large number of Vietnamese people. The use of public space for such an event is the only way of creating an image of Vietnamese people as having solidarity and political might. At the same time Tet is a venue for a reassertion to both the Vietnamese communities and to mainstream political leaders of 'values' that are labelled typically Vietnamese, therefore perpetuating myths of an unchanging traditional culture in exile.

\textsuperscript{66}Lamphere (1992:17) develops Van Maanen's expression 'critical tale' to refer to urban ethnographies that are 'strategically situated to shed light on larger social, political, symbolic or economic issues' (Van Maanen, 1988:127). Lamphere suggests a productive form of urban ethnographic writing would be one which, through 'vignettes', explores 'the meanings and actions of those being studied but also connects these to an analysis of structure and power' (p.17). I have examined Tet as a critical tale that encapsulates both micro and macro social relations.
Tet in Vietnam

Before analysing the public Tet festival, I will begin by examining the accounts of Hong, Quyen, Huong and Dinh of previous Tets in Vietnam and contrast these with their experience of Tet in Australia. Tet is celebrated to welcome the new year and is believed to bring about a new and positive moment in the lives of everyone. The cycle of nature is thought to commence at the arrival of Spring, so Tet heralds this season that signifies beginnings and re-commencements of both nature and human activities. Quyen says,

Because it was also Spring we would all feel as if the whole world was celebrating with us, the birds always seem to appear at Tet, flowers come out, and the warmer weather arrives.

Tet also is symbolic of the family and the reunion of kin who may have been away from each other through the year. The coming together of family members under the one roof is profoundly important at Tet as it conveys what is considered the most valued marker of Vietnamese social life - the communality and unity of the family. Quyen tells,

I always felt that the best part of Tet was having all the family together. The days before Tet people would be travelling throughout the country trying to get to their families in time. The roads were crowded with people laden down with flowers and food for the days ahead. I remember my mother making food weeks ahead. I always was trying to steal little pieces of cake while she was making it.

In former times all Vietnamese people also celebrated their birthday at Tet and this was the time where one’s age progressed one year. Some suggest that the precise anniversaries of one’s birth were not celebrated in Vietnam because of the large number of children in each family. The lack of focus on the individual and the

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67 I also here refer to the work of Huynh Dinh Te (1989) and Dang Lam Sang (1990) who have both outlined the prescribed rituals and behaviours associated with Tet.

68 Children are taken to be one year old until their first Tet when they become two years old (Huynh Dinh Te, 1989:17). In families where birthdays were celebrated gifts were usually not given. Even though there was a general lack of emphasis on birthdays there are usually two celebrations during a child’s first year. These are probably celebrations for a child’s having reached the respective ages of one month and twelve months and reflect historically high infant mortality rates.
emphasis on communal activities is probably a more important reason why birthdays were traditionally not celebrated.

_Here, in Australia, we just follow our usual birthdays and we don’t think of turning a year older every year. We do what every other Australian does._

Quyen indicates here that many aspects of Tet have been transformed to accommodate mainstream activities. Birthdays are the quintessential celebration of the individual. In Vietnam, as everyone has a birthday at Tet, the focus is less on the individual than on familial relationships. In Australia, the trend to celebrate birthdays individually is indicative also of the uncertainty of Tet outside of Vietnam. The absence of family members and the separation from a populace cognisant of the primacy of Tet has forced many to celebrate birthdays as separate events.

Hong was twelve when she left Vietnam, and her first Tet in Australia was a sad event. She says,

_All my memories of Vietnam were made really sharp at Tet because Tet for me means being in Vietnam. I know it is about family being close and the spring coming, the whole year starting again. But it has just got to be in Vietnam. Firstly, it is spring there and it isn’t spring here. So everything about Tet makes you feel as if it is the new year. There are peach blossom and flowers everywhere. Everyone is dressed up. It goes for three days so everything closes, and houses are filled with food, special foods for Tet. The preparation takes days, weeks even. We stop what is happening in our lives, and everything is refreshed, and we are all together, all the family and everyone else who is important. Children get presents. I will never forget Tet in Vietnam. It could never be the same in Australia._

Hong expressed the idea that Tet, although celebrated primarily within families, contains within it the notion that the entire country is celebrating. So Tet in Australia is a moment for reflecting on migrancy, and marginal status, as it is almost completely ignored by mainstream society. A Vietnamese-Australian writing about Tet says,

_‘For most if not all Vietnamese expatriates, whether by choice or by force of circumstances, the cherished wish is to be able to celebrate those festivals in their native land in the traditional atmosphere with_
their own people. In their adopted countries, however, these festivals and ceremonies, in whatever form, should help maintain their culture and traditions especially for their future generations and also add yet another hue to the existing multicultural ‘rainbow’...’ (Dang Lam Sang, 1990:10).

At Tet, enriching the experience that others might have of diversity in Australia (adding ‘hue’ to the ‘rainbow’), and maintaining ‘culture and tradition’ is inevitably experienced as loss. Likewise, Huong commented,

Tet is different here mostly because it really has to be in Vietnam – it’s Vietnamese and so will never be the same here.

Huong is expressing a common view that Tet is related to the country itself hence the strangeness of a migrant Tet. At Tet the sense of returning to one’s roots in thought and memory is also felt as a loss of home, and as an incomplete homecoming.

Both in former times and presently in Vietnam almost all markets, shops, businesses, schools and government offices are closed over Tet. Although the official celebration is three days, because many family members must travel long distances over Tet many people take a holiday for longer than this. While the first days of Tet emphasise the togetherness of the family, as the days pass streetlife becomes very active. Music is played on the streets and many theatres are open to the public with special Tet performances.

After the three day closure of government offices people return to work sometimes after a brief formal re-opening ceremony. Although people usually feel refreshed, the period immediately after Tet is not seen as so exciting as the days immediately preceding it. Months before Tet people start anticipating the celebration and begin preparations which intensify in the weeks prior to the period of festivities. As Huynh Dinh Te (1989:17-18) reports, houses are thoroughly cleaned, and are frequently repainted. All the household items like furniture, trays and cooking utensils are repaired, cleaned and shined. Houses are decorated with flowers and many people discard old and broken items during this period. Most of these activities are performed in an attempt to replicate the rebirth of nature and the regeneration of the spring season (ibid). As well as signifying rebirth in the immediate environment, people also like to appear revitalised and invigorated. They
achieve this by making new clothes specially for Tet, having haircuts and visiting to the dentist to have their teeth cleaned. As Quyen says.

*The whole country is in a state of excitement. Even though people are rushing everywhere they are all smiling and happy. In all the rush, people don’t get anxious or impatient, everyone seems to help each other out because they know that everyone is like them, looking forward to Tet and to getting all the family together again. Everyone feels important, we are all like kings at Tet.*

At Tet, the fostering of generosity within the family is extended to those in need outside the family. Because of the notion that one must exhibit the most favourable qualities at Tet, largesse and benevolence in the form of gifts, usually of clothes, food or money are extended to those who are disadvantaged. At the same time, the underprivileged often attempt to increase their possibilities for success by emulating the achievement of the prosperous and affluent in their dress and demeanour. For some poor rural families Tet is the only time of the year in which to replace worn out clothes with new ones. It is also an occasion in which one should not be frugal as this will be interpreted as a meanness of spirit. Food which at other times may be seen as lavish is freely supplied at Tet and families will provide abundant meals for all visitors. Houses overflow with family members and visitors bringing food, flowers, decorations and cards for the occasion of Tet. Generous gifts are given to friends and family as well as to bosses and others who may have previously provided assistance, encouragement or support (Huynh Dinh Te, 1989:18). In a reinforcement of the mutual ties of co-operation and continuing alliance, people reserve the most valued presents for present and future in-laws (ibid). Huong says,

*In Australia we no longer give each other presents, at Tet just some money or small presents for the children. Birthdays and Christmas are the time for presents now.*

Here again, Vietnamese people have chosen the practices of the wider society, and in doing so have removed some of the unique qualities of Tet. For most, this is experienced as a further distancing of themselves from Vietnam.

In Vietnam, Tet is unquestionably the pre-eminent celebration of both family and country. It is such a momentous focus of the year that many Vietnamese see it as the point at which life moves forward, and during which time one develops and transforms as a person. For many it is also a break from a life of labour and
exertion and in some ways is viewed as the exemplification of the purpose of one’s efforts, a confluence of the values of participation and hard work as benefitting both kin and community. In rural areas many find Tet a satisfying completion of a year of work, and one of the few times of rest, not only being an interval between phases of labour but also a moment of festivity and abundance. Quyen says,

>We stopped all work and all worrying at Tet. It was always the chance to feel as if you could begin your life again, and make all the bad things that had happened disappear. For some people it was the only time that they didn’t work in the whole year. In Australia, most of us have to work at Tet, although many will take one or two days off. But because the rest of the country is all at work and carrying on their normal lives, there is no atmosphere of Tet in Australia. We used to feel it on the streets days and even weeks before Tet, in Vietnam. But here you might just ring someone up and ask, ‘What are you doing at Tet?’, and sometimes they may not have even thought about it. It was everywhere in my country. I suppose it is because here everyone has different festivals and ours is just one. It shows me how we aren’t very important, just one ethnic group.

For Quyen, Tet in Vietnam is an entire nation of people celebrating together the same event, an event felt by family and strangers alike, and palpable on every street. This is in sharp contrast to the lack of visibility of Tet in Australia. Quyen was here also expressing the way in which Tet can signify the minority status of Vietnamese living in Australia, and the transformation of Tet from a majority event in the homeland into one of many ‘ethnic’ festivals.

The sense of belonging to a family is intensified at Tet when effort is expended to bring together all those who have been separated. It is not only the moment to think about family members separated by space but also the moment to summon back ancestral spirits (see Huynh Dinh Te, 1989:18). Vietnamese people through time and space are thus linked together through the celebration of Tet in the one house. Huong says,

>It was absolutely essential to be back with our families. During the war, many people would risk their lives to return to their families. Everyone heard that the northern army did not return to their families for years on end, even at Tet, because of their dedication to the cause of communism.
We thought the northern army were inhuman because of this. People could respect their endurance and the way they could fight, but they couldn’t understand that they could be separated from their families for so long.

Huong’s comments again demonstrate that a unified family in one domestic space is of primary concern for many Vietnamese families, not only for living members of the family but also for the dead. Many Vietnamese people still believe that their ancestors return at Tet to feast with their families, to bring them good fortune and to sanction the appropriateness of Tet celebrations. Huynh Dinh Te (1989:18) reports that on the eve of Tet ancestors are ushered into the home with prayers and ritual offerings of food and drink. This ceremony occurs on every day of Tet – a welcoming in of the spirits, and thankful praise for ancestral benevolence. Finally on the evening of the third day of Tet the ancestors are farewelled from the house and once more asked to bestow good favour upon the family. It is after this final ceremony for the ancestors that children receive their new year ‘lucky money’ wrapped in a red envelope and that young and old give further new year wishes for the year ahead (ibid). This final coming together of all the family reinforces the sense of continuity and family unity. Many people both in Australia and in Vietnam do not accept the notion of a life after death, but even those frequently perform Tet rituals to their ancestors as a moment of reflection upon the past and in remembrance of their dead relatives. In Australia, however, there are now many people who prefer to remember their dead relatives at death anniversaries only. Dinh says,

It is still very important to my father to worship our family’s ancestors at Tet. It makes him sad for Tet here. I always remember Tet as being happy even when we thought of our ancestors. Being back together as a family we should celebrate but my father thinks now only about what is missing, who has died and the family back home.

The migrant Tet has become for many a moment to dwell upon missing family and to mourn their loss.

On the eve of Tet at midnight is the moment that one passes from the old year to the new year, called giao thua. At this moment there is an explosion of noise as people
call out, firecrackers\textsuperscript{69} are exploded and drums are beaten in temples. At midnight many people attend their pagoda so that they may pray as well as to pick the earliest spring buds (hai loc) which are believed to bring good fortune to those who find them (Huynh Dinh Te, 1989:18). In Australia many Vietnamese people stay up late in order to telephone their families at the moment of midnight in Vietnam. In the past, firecrackers were exploded and this signified prosperity, affluence and celebration. Some people also believe that firecrackers chase away harmful spirits. On the eve of Tet people also attend their pagodas and temples so that they may offer prayers for the new year and request of the Buddha good fortune ahead (ibid). Pagodas in all Australian cities have special Tet services either on the eve of Tet or on one of the following days. Dinh comments,

\textit{When I first came to Australia my brother Long and I were the only ones here and the moment of midnight was really hard. We would feel so alone and far away from our family in Vietnam. In Vietnam we would look forward to good things happening in the year but here we would only think of how to be with our family again.}

Here again, what in Vietnam was a moment to look forward to a new year, in Australia Tet is often the moment for thinking back to Vietnam and to family left behind.

The family home is the central place around which the rituals of Tet occur. The first morning of Tet is a time to make visits to relatives and other close family friends. Everyone wishes each other good fortune and prosperity for the year ahead and offer each other traditional Tet food and drinks. During the first three days of Tet these visits occupy a lot of time but the first day is reserved for visiting those whose relationship is the most meaningful. Huong comments,

\textit{We still visit people at Tet usually on the weekend near Tet, often not on the actual day. But the number of people we go to see is much less than in Vietnam. We just visit our immediate family, maybe close friends of the family too. In our family we spend most time with old}

\textsuperscript{69} Firecrackers were banned in Vietnam before Tet in 1995 for safety reasons. However, people present in Vietnam for Tet that year informed me that they still heard firecrackers being illegally exploded. Firecrackers are such an important element of Tet that some people had recorded on tape the sounds of firecrackers to play at Tet and other celebrations. Ironically, it is now only overseas Vietnamese who may hear firecrackers explode at Tet during the public celebrations.
people because we know they are the ones who will be missing home the most.

Here, the scale of Tet is reduced, which is mostly a reflection of the distance between relatives and friends in Australia as well as the contraction in family size after migration. The entry of outsiders into the family home is no longer held to be central to the celebration of Tet.

The occurrences of the first day of Tet are thought to presage the events for the year. There is a prohibition on sweeping the house during the first day of Tet and no rubbish can be picked up for the whole three days because this may bring bad luck to a person. The first person entering a house at Tet brings blessings through their physical presence, filling the house and its occupants with either good or bad fortune for the following year. It is for this reason that people in mourning or those who have just lost money do not visit anyone on the first day in order to spare them misfortune. People often choose a specific ‘lucky’ person to invite into their homes to be the first visitor in order to have the most prosperous year ahead. The luck of that person is determined by their social position, wealth, good fortune or their temperament. In the past, on the first day of Tet people often would carefully choose the most auspicious direction and time of their first outing, according to their horoscope (ibid; Dang Lam Sang, 1990). Quyen says,

I still like someone important or successful to come to my house first on Tet morning, but here I don’t worry too much if nothing happens or no-one comes. People seem too busy here sometimes so they might visit after a few days. It doesn’t matter so much anymore.

In Australia, very few people take the trouble to select the first visitor to their house or to choose the most auspicious time for their first visit outside as the home has lost its sacrosanct quality and Tet is experienced in a scaled-down form.

The emotional state of people at Tet is meant to signify the hope for the future year. it is for this reason that people attempt to put on their best face for the days of Tet, to be as happy and pleasant as possible to those around them. The mood of people at Tet should reflect generosity of spirit and genuine warmth. Huynh Dinh Te (1989:19) and Dang Lam Sang (1990) both report one of the principle ideals of Tet is that as spring returns and all the plants come to life again it is believed that humans can attempt to emulate nature, developing a new outlook in which they can

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discard worries, grudges, hatred and ill-feeling. People attempt to foster only positive thoughts, to say only pleasant things and to entertain only kind feelings, and thus have the expectation that they may contribute to a harmonious environment, both natural and spiritual. Tet, with all its changed meanings still remains to most Vietnamese-Australians a significant period of expectation an anticipation for better days to come, as well as encapsulating the longing for a restoration of their homeland and family reunion. It is also at this time that people attempt to forget about past bad behaviour and mistakes of others. If any ill-feeling arises, there is a great effort put into avoiding disagreements or criticisms. In an attempt to model their behaviour for the year ahead, intentions and resolutions are acted upon. People even try to contact people with whom they have had painful and argumentative relationships in the hope that Tet will reform unacceptable behaviour more permanently. Huong reveals this is all too often an ideal difficult to maintain in reality. She comments on the difference in this aspect of Tet in Australia,

When we were children we had to be so well-behaved at Tet, and even if we were naughty our parents never complained about it. We always knew no-one would get angry with us or punish us when we were children. I remember even my father being really very friendly to a neighbour that he hated. That always happened at Tet. People would even pay up any debts that they owed anyone, give back anything they had borrowed and be very friendly. I think the opposite happens here. I even find my mother criticising me at Tet more for becoming so Australian. I think I heard that happens at Christmas in Australia, families getting together and arguing. At Tet here a lot of families might fight like that because they aren’t so Vietnamese anymore.

Tet can thus become a moment signifying separation and difference between family members, who may only be together at Tet out of a sense of obligation.

As Tet signals the arrival of Spring, spring flowers are always highly sought after at Tet. In north Vietnam, people grow the pink peach blossom (hoa dao) and this decorates almost all houses, even the houses of the disadvantaged, during the New Year festival. Further south in other regions of Vietnam it is the yellow apricot blossom (hoa mai) which is more readily available which signifies Tet. White apricot blossom, chrysanthemum, dahlia, and narcissus are also popular, but hoa dao and hoa mai remain the quintessential Tet flowers (see Huynh Dinh
Te, 1989: 19). Here, in Australia, Quyen took a dead branch from her garden and had decorated it with yellow flowers made from silk (see Plate 5). She placed this Tet tree in her living room permanently several years ago because that way it will always be Tet. At many of the Tet celebrations in churches, pagodas, and halls in Australia, branches are decorated with paper flowers, either yellow or red. For many, these paper flowers are a symbol of the inauthenticity of Tet in Australia. Some people told me that paper or cloth flowers made them feel that Tet in summer in Australia was forced and did not conform to nature. The desire to follow nature and to allow human action to follow the seasons is widely held, and is another reason why Tet in Australia is, for many, unacceptable.

At Tet in Vietnam many entertainments are offered including films, plays, and singing. Many people parade along the streets at Tet in their new clothes, and partake in the street activities. Until fireworks were banned in 1995, the streets were filled with the sounds of exploding firecrackers throughout the Tet period. As well as playing games at home many people also take to the street to engage in street games. For children there are continuous activities and handmade toys available. For adults the games include ‘special games of dice, cards, literary riddles, movies and theatres in town and wrestling, races, buffalo fights, and cock fights in the countryside’ (Huynh Dinh Te, 1989:19-20). Gambling is traditionally popular at Tet and even though it is now illegal many people still engage in this activity. In the past, older people would particularly enjoy attending traditional theatre in order to follow the actions of the characters of the play for what they may reveal about the year ahead (ibid). By contrast, in Australia a small number of entertainments, such as martial arts performances, dancing and plays, are provided by the Vietnamese community in a defined place, and almost all are controlled by the Vietnamese community organisation.

Tet for many is a highly emotional event, very often recalling sad events as well as happy. In the diaspora, the prescribed rituals of Tet have often reduced or been abandoned altogether in a general reduction of ritual form. Being separated from family is perhaps the greatest sadness, but recalling Tets in Vietnam which marked unhappy events is also a reason for sadness. The 1968 Tet70 is remembered by

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70 The Tet Offensive was a series of coordinated attacks by the North Vietnamese troops throughout south and central Vietnam. These attacks were aimed at bringing the US to
many as a dramatic and disturbing Tet, where firecrackers blended with gunshot, helicopters and terror. For Quyen,

*Tet in Vietnam was often awful during the war. We always tried to be happy but we were often really worried and unsure about the year ahead. At Tet, we could at least hope things would change. But look at 1968, it was like the world ending.*

It was chaos throughout the south, many families stranded for days unable to cross bridges that had been destroyed, finding burnt-down houses when they returned to their villages, and many dead. People wondered why all the Vietnamese, both northerners and southern Vietcong would fight on the traditional New Years holiday. Many believed that this indicated the lack of culture as well as the perversity of the northern army and the Vietcong.

Tet is often not celebrated in people’s homes in Australia, and due to people’s working lives being interrupted, when it is celebrated it is done in a reduced form. However, people usually do make special foods, and visit people on the first day of Tet. Many ring home to Vietnam to speak to family members. Tet has become a ritual of remembrance for their country and for the past, and thus offers a sense of continuity to the lives of Vietnamese people. It is also a moment to dwell upon what people conceive of as the authenticity or inauthenticity of members of the community and thus to draw lines and reinforce boundaries on notions of tradition.

**The public Tet, western Sydney**

The move from a countrywide Tet centred in people’s homes to a public Tet in Australia confined to a park or a street, is a dramatic reduction in spatial scale reflecting the move to minority status. These changes reveal the way in which Tet has been singled out as a manifestation of a political will. Several thousand Vietnamese people gather at a park in Western Sydney at the opening of the Tet the negotiating table. This was the first time that the war was brought to the cities, and, although the northerners and the Vietcong sustained enormous numbers of casualties, it was a psychological victory for them (see Young, 1991 for a detailed account).
celebrations (Plate 19). The opening ceremony is planned by the Vietnamese Community Organisation and represents many of the broader themes and preoccupations of the Vietnamese in Australia. The form of Tet has moved out of the home and into a public space, and represents not only the preoccupation of migrancy in Australia, but also the reformatting of a major yearly Vietnamese event in spatial terms. Such a public display for Tet can only occur in Australia’s largest cities. In Canberra, for example, there is no such event but, rather, a night of entertainment at a college hall.

Tet is the pivotal yearly event that not only signifies connection to the homeland but also constitutes that union. Tet in the incarnation of the principle elements of the Vietnamese diaspora linkage to the former homeland in its accentuation of Vietnamese historical, cultural and religious connections to the country. At the same time it also emphasises the separation from Vietnam and the development of specific migrant Vietnamese identifications with attention being drawn to political opposition to communism and to Vietnamese minority status within Australia. Tet remains the premier event for demonstrating the shared meanings and memories of Vietnamese-Australians. The public celebrations always include components that illustrate both the ‘traditional’ foundation of Tet including religious sanctioning of the festivities, commemorative and celebratory elements, and re-assertion of political allegiance to anti-communism. The public Tet begins with fireworks and ritual worship of ancestors. The formal ceremony includes the national anthems of Australia and the Republic of South Vietnam, a minute of silence in remembrance of anti-communist resistance fighters and speeches by leaders of Vietnamese community organisations. After this there are usually demonstrations of dancing and martial arts as well as songs and music. One can purchase Vietnamese food, books, music tapes and there are often fair rides for children. There are also demonstrations from local Vietnamese scouting organisations (see Plate 21) as well as exhibitions of Vietnamese art (Plate 22). In 1995 an exhibition at Fairfield showground aimed to alert the public to human rights abuses in Vietnam with vivid photographs and written documentation of human rights violations in Vietnam. Tet is the only public ‘recurring social action’71 that can help to define the distinctiveness of Vietnamese

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71 McCall, Burnley, & Encel (1985:13) have proposed the following definition of ethnicity, from which this expression is borrowed – ‘Ethnicity is that form of named rhetorical distinctiveness that emphasises a transgenerational commonality of symbolic meaning, sustained and reinforced by recurring social actions’. Although there are other
Plate 19. Tet opening, Cabravale Park, 1993
Girls dressed in ao dai. The colours, yellow and red, are of the flag of the Republic of South Vietnam (pre-1975).

Plate 20. Tet, Cabravale Park, 1993
The war memorial bandstand has been converted to a pagoda for the opening ceremony during which incense is burned for the ancestors.
Plate 21. Scouts, Tet, Cabramatta, 1993

Plate 22. Art Exhibition opening, Cabramatta, Tet, 1993
Leaders of the Vietnamese community speaking with the NSW Premier, John Fahey.
people. For several years the NSW state government provided salaries for two community workers to work within the Vietnamese communities. That one of these workers is employed for six months of the year for the purpose of helping to organise the Tet festival (rather than directly working on social welfare issues) indicates how important Tet is perceived within the community organisations.

Although Tet has different meanings to different people, Tet also evokes some common associations for the majority. In a public festival such as occurs in Western Sydney, these associations are drawn out, and become the leitmotif of the event. While the intersubjective meanings of such an event are manifold, the public rhetoric presents norms and expectations for the community as a whole. The public and private Tets are potent displays of Vietnamese identity to themselves combined with an assertion of belonging. The public Tet exposes the connections and differences between the expressions of Vietnamese identity at the opening ceremony of Tet and the private Tet celebrations in family homes in Vietnam. Events like Tet provide a tangible means of representing ‘imagined communities’ to themselves (see Anderson, 1983). Vietnamese can celebrate New Year in Australia by visiting the pagodas, worshipping their ancestors, visiting relatives and friends, eating special foods, wearing new clothes, and, on the eve of Tet meeting at a large public celebration in a park or showground in western Sydney72 (see Plates 19-26). They feel that their lives are renewed each New Year and they want to share that feeling. Tet is a celebration of unity and solidarity, a coalescence of the remembrance of the nation and its history, and an honouring of the family. Many people express confusion at the time of Tet because it awakens memories of Vietnam. Their desire to be part of Australian society and yet to also be Vietnamese is exemplified in the many public speeches by community leaders made at this time exhorting Vietnamese people to be at the same time Vietnamese and to embrace the ideals of Australian society (perceived as ideals of freedom and democracy). The pre-eminence of the Vietnamese Community Organisation is evident at Tet. This organisation supervises the public opening ceremony and the stalls that surround the open-air stage and

social actions of Australian-Vietnamese that may emphasise their difference (like language, and the imagery of Vietnam), Tet is the only public display of ethnicity.

72Until 1995, the Tet celebrations were held in Cabra Park in Cabramatta. However the venue was changed to Fairfield Showground in 1995. In 1996 it was held at Warwick Farm Racecourse, Warwick Farm. From 1997 onwards Tet will be at the new Vietnamese Community and Cultural Centre at Bonnyrigg, also in western Sydney.
Plate 23. Parade through Freedom Plaza, Tet, 1993

Plate 24. Food Stall, Cabravale Park, Cabramatta, Tet, 1993
Tree decorated with ‘lucky money’ for children.

Plate 26. Music stall, Cabravale Park, Cabramatta, Tet, 1993
Vietnamese music tapes and posters of Vietnamese singers are on sale.
seating. They liaise with members of the Australian political community and the Police who attend the Tet ceremony as guests.

On the three occasions I attended Tet celebrations in western Sydney, in 1992, 1993, and 1995, the Australian political leaders who were invited to attend the opening of Tet publicly spoke to a gathering of several thousand Vietnamese people, of the great success of the Vietnamese in Australia. Here they perpetuated further the heroic folktale of the refugee making good. For example, in the speeches at Tet there is no mention of Vietnamese unemployment levels but frequent reference to the success of Vietnamese students in the Higher School Certificate. Vietnamese are very aware of the representation of themselves as successful and hard-working and attempt to live up to it but are frequently bitterly resentful when reality does not turn out the way they wished. Values and lifestyles are very often described in generalities by both Vietnamese and Australians and this continues to perpetuate myths and stereotypes that are traded between the two groups.

In Vietnam historically people depended upon kin ties to assist them in achieving goals. Many find it difficult to accommodate to the model of the educational, economic and political organisation in Australia which de-emphasises social relations and accentuates personal attributes. Because of the perceived underplaying of social and familial attachments in Australia, there is, for many Vietnamese, a continuing oscillation between belonging and being alienated. A prominent female leader of a community organisation in Melbourne, Cam Nguyen, had this to say about the state’s reaction to the political voice of Vietnamese-Australians.

‘Among our closest and dearest friends, several tried very hard to pressure us into changing our minds, saying that a family like ours was making a mistake in preferring Australia to Europe. Ironically, the tribulations we suffered before being allowed into Australia nearly dissuaded us from coming. I refer in particular to the undertaking which my husband, as a high official of the former Republic of Vietnam, had to give to abstain from political activities in Australia. That undemocratic and discriminatory measure was subsequently cancelled by the Fraser Government with a letter of apology from Mr. MacKellar, the then Immigration Minister’ (Cam Nguyen, 1989:52).
Many Vietnamese people feel, like Cam Nguyen, that Australia does not accept their ethnic identifications, and will not if they are to become ‘true Australians’. People constantly question whether one can be morally and psychically healthy by being both Australian and Vietnamese. Tet is a moment where these concerns are underscored. Although the Vietnamese population in Australia is by no means uniform in its ethnic, religious, class, and political dimensions there is still a strong and abiding sense of shared history and experience between most people born in Vietnam. Commonality and difference thus exist simultaneously and this amalgam often presents some contestation over public meanings of what it is to be Vietnamese. In many encounters I had explanations were given about the divisions and fragmentations between people. As has already been described, there are numerous social, religious and political cleavages within Vietnamese communities but, in spite of this, the Vietnamese Community Organisation attempts to present a united front at the Tet celebrations. This, I believe, is because Tet is a very public display attended by many political leaders outside the community. At Tet many of the non-Vietnamese politicians wish to be seen as supporting the Vietnamese community because they have many Vietnamese people in their electorates (see Plate 22). On the other hand, the Vietnamese wish to be seen as a harmonious and successful community in order that they may obtain more power and resources for themselves in the future. This is evidenced in this comment by one of the Vietnamese leaders,

This part of Tet is important to us, the meeting and networking with politicians and public servants who can help us. We want to show that we are large and strong and that they will make the right choice if they invest their resources in the Vietnamese. They can see that we have a strong cultural tradition with our New Year celebrations and that we contribute to cultural life in Australia. That we contribute to the economy and to society in general has to be spelt out to people who may be able to help us. So that is why we invite them all along here.

The overtly political nature of Tet is expressed also in the Vietnamese language newspapers. For example in Chuong Saigon (2 Feb, 1993:22-3) Tet was described as follows,

‘Lunar New Year fairs had been held by Vietnamese communities in all capitals. The largest ones had been in Sydney and Melbourne. All had been very successful. Those attending had demonstrated that they did
not heed the sweet voice of communist regime in Hanoi that was seeking to induce them to go back to Vietnam for the new year celebrations. The fairs had also been well attended by Australian dignitaries and politicians of all persuasions. They had been generous in their praise of the achievements of the community. The new year had been a chance for misunderstandings to be cleared up, as well as for cooperation with all levels to prosper.

One aspect of the political nature of Australian Tet is thus to make allies with those in mainstream politics. However, the private way that Tet is celebrated is not at all like this. The visits by friends and relatives are centred around being together and attempting to make a positive influence upon the year ahead by expressing positive thoughts and actions. Debts are often repaid at this time. The engagement with mainstream politicians is often viewed by Vietnamese people not in any position of power as a push by community leaders for their own prestige and status, rather than to achieve anything worthwhile for the community as a whole.

At Tet the visual imagery simultaneously emphasises attachment to the nation and its history, and a rejection of anti-communism. At each public Tet in Sydney at which I was present, thousands of Vietnamese people attended the opening ceremony. Each year the park or showground was draped with flags from the former Republic of Vietnam and anti-communist literature was sold in booths surrounding the festivities. Every speech was peppered with references to the former South Vietnam and the love of democracy among Vietnamese in Australia. Claiming political allegiance to anti-communist causes is also seen as a strategy for emphasising that Vietnamese people are legitimate political refugees rather than a people escaping poverty. The South Vietnamese flag as well as all the social and cultural activities

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73 The flag of the Republic of South Vietnam is an important visual symbol of political allegiance and is present at all public Vietnamese events. The flag creates an imaginary world of the past, and unites people through its associations with a Vietnam of former times. By signifying political continuity it has the added emotional impetus of suggesting a non-communist future in Vietnam that may continue the nostalgic past and wipe out all that was in between. It 'summarises' (Ortner's term, see Ortner, 1973:1339-40) the relationship that people have with their homeland as well as to each other. The flag is always a prominent part of all the Vietnamese community events. The Vietnamese language newspaper Viet-Luan (20 March, 1990) reported that many members of the Vietnamese community were dismayed about the use of the current flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) that was used in an Sydney newspaper article about Vietnamese in Australia. They found this insensitive and were angry that the mainstream newspaper had linked them with the communist regime. In 1989 at a citizenship ceremony in Springvale, Victoria, a Vietnamese flag (DRV) was used for
reinforce the collective identity of the community (see Plates 27 and 28). These collective symbols allow the Vietnamese to make claims for the centrality of values they deem fundamental. These values frequently reflect the political desire to oppose the communist regime and to resist domination from non-Vietnamese cultural formations. The different activities and visual manifestations of Tet almost all express a coalescence of political, historical, religious, and social components.

The speeches of Vietnamese leaders at Tet indicate that the claims for a particular political and cultural identity can be in counterbalance to dominant representations. Leaders spoke of Vietnamese identity in Australia being in part a reaction against what are perceived to be negative aspects of western capitalist society. Thus it was asserted that many of the Vietnamese values could counteract the undesirable Western principles - spirituality against materialism, 'hard work' against laziness, sharing against white individualism, extended kin against selfishness, and the centrality of the family against the focus on individual independence. Here, Vietnamese identity reflects the selective negotiation of 'tradition' and the appropriation of certain cultural components and the rejection of others. Although these assertions of particular ideals are in part providing opposition to the prevailing dominant discourse they are themselves also incorporated within historically specific structures of inequality. The strategies for such re-creations of 'tradition' often have the effect of masking the affinities between the Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese but instead crystallise differences. An analysis of Tet in the diaspora community can thus indicate both the unfolding and contested nature of Vietnamese identities and the political force of tradition is directing the shape of identity formations.
Plate 27. Demonstration outside Vietnamese Embassy, Canberra, 30 April, 1995

The flag is placed on a memorial to Australian Vietnam War Veterans.

Although each of the three Tet celebrations I have attended follow a similar format and also have similar content of the speeches, I will here focus on the 1995 Tet celebrations as it is the most recent Tet. This Tet was held in Fairfield Showground over a three day period. The opening ceremony was on Saturday, January 28. It began with the lighting of firecrackers at the entrance to the Showground, and then Buddhist leaders lit incense. The Fairground was set up with a central stage in front of which were several hundred seated dignitaries, both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. Around the seated area, several hundred people gathered. Still further around this central area was a ring of shops and stalls, selling Vietnamese food and drinks, Vietnamese music and other items such as toys and books. There were also other information stalls, run by community organisations, immigration companies, Telstra, and banks.

After the fire crackers and the burning of incense, the anthem of the former Republic of Vietnam was sung followed by the observation of one minute's silence. A noticeable slippage occurred between the spoken Vietnamese and the translated English, most apparent in the introduction to period of silence. The Vietnamese version of the introduction to the one minute’s silence is translated as,

To commemorate soldiers and people who sacrificed their lives while escaping by sea in search of freedom from the communist regime, and for soldiers and other people who are still fighting night and day to liberate their country from communism.

However, after this was read in Vietnamese, the English translation was given as follows,

Observation of one minute’s silence to commemorate the Australian and Vietnamese people who have sacrificed their lives for freedom and democracy.

The transmutation that occurs in the English version that was given to the official guests emphasised the Australian contribution to Vietnamese people’s freedom while mentioning neither communism nor the continual struggle of resistance in Vietnam and in the overseas community. This rupture between the text given to Vietnamese-speaking people and that given to non-Vietnamese guests is also

744 I thank Philip Taylor (Anthropology, RSPAS, ANU) for pointing this out to me.
indicative of the way in which a compulsive memorialisation of the past may be consciously viewed by its authors as unsavoury to mainstream society. It is hard for many Vietnamese to express their political views in a public forum as they are aware that the broader community does not view positively what may be thought of as political division in ethnic communities (noted also by Viviani, 1985:240). Tet is an opportunity to subtly transmit political statements and reaffirm political allegiances, while seemingly bringing together people for an affirmation of tradition. This self-conscious perception that one must reveal only what is considered ‘acceptable’ politics, emphasises the degree to which Vietnamese people may feel muted in their political vocalisations.

Cuong Vo, President of the Vietnamese Community in NSW, gave the most prominent speech. He began by wishing everyone a happy new year for the Year of the Pig and then thanked all the local political leaders and community workers including the police. Then he said (first in Vietnamese and then in English).

*This is a good opportunity to reveal what we have done in the past and achieved previously to promote the value of our traditional culture in Australia as we consistently struggle for democracy and human rights for Vietnamese people inside Vietnam. The past twenty years is the most sorry period of Vietnamese people. After the period April 1975, millions of Vietnamese people left their homeland seeking freedom by risking their lives in the perilous sea. This has never happened for five thousand years in the history of the establishment and protection of their homeland. With compassion and humanity of the Australian people and by proficient parliamentary governments there have been 150,000 Vietnamese people settled successfully in Australia. All those who have saved their lives from the sea and have been given the opportunity to recommence their new life from empty hands, their focus for future are their strong minds, willingness, and traditional culture in order to integrate in this multicultural society. Twenty years may be a long lifespan for a new community but just a short period of time for an ethnic community like Vietnamese with different links from war-torn countries to resettle a new life in Australia. The Vietnamese community therefore faces increasing employment and other social difficulties. I strongly believe in the Australian people and the*
Australian government of different levels to share this thorn with our community. The Vietnamese community in Australia is also deeply concerned for the fate of Vietnamese boat people in South-East Asian countries suffering an erroneous screening procedure from the local authorities as well as of UNHCR. Honestly and truly speaking Australia has generously accepted the largest number of Vietnamese refugees for its population. I take this opportunity to praise the humanitarian tradition of Australian people and the Australian government in the last 20 years for caring for Vietnamese refugees. This value will become an ideal to pursue for the future. Being a refugee community, we are proud to live in the democratic society of Australia. We therefore never accept a mono political party which has been ruling in Vietnam. We will consistently struggle as long as the basic human rights in Vietnam be complying to the international declaration of human rights atrocities ... Last but not least, on behalf of the secretary of the Vietnamese Community Organisation in NSW I present to the Fairfield City Council the development application form for the Community Centre at Bonnyrigg has been lodged for five years but the building application has not been released and it is not the fault of the new mayor of Fairfield City Council but the previous mayor and council. The money is in the bank since we received a grant of 200,000 dollars from Nick Greiner’s government and an equal amount donated from our community. The interest from the bank is quite enough. We do not need more interest but we still need a centre. I strongly believe the promise of the mayor that the building application approval will be issued soon. Before coming to conclusion, I would like to thank Fairfield City Council for offering our community the venue to organise successfully this new year’s festival. Thankyou very much ladies and gentlemen.

I will briefly outline the key issues that this speech provoked. The first issue was to define the Vietnamese community, to itself and to others present. The norm, (or possibly the ‘ideal’) highlighted was the stereotype of the hardworking, and achievement-oriented political refugee. The Vietnamese community was thus defined, not as migrants but as refugees, and therefore as a political group. The political aims of the speech were to reinforce anti-communism, to urge action of the
issue of Vietnamese refugees in South East Asian refugee camps, to insist on government assistance to fight unemployment, and to fight for approval for a community centre in Bonnyrigg. That unemployment was chosen as the only social problem mentioned is because the wider Australian society could possibly take the blame for such a problem. Drugs, domestic violence and other crimes are not mentioned as they are considered to originate within the community, whereas unemployment is thought to have its origins in structural inequalities in the wider Australian community. It is thus the only social problem able to be mentioned as it deflects focus away from the ‘problems’ of the Vietnamese communities. Cuong Vo’s speech made mention of the role of the wider Australian society in welcoming refugees as a paternalistic one – helping and caring for Vietnamese people. There was also a subtle shift from talking about the Vietnamese community to speaking of the Vietnamese Community Organisation as if the two were synonymous. Cuong Vo also conveyed the image of Vietnam as one people with one history to the Vietnamese and general public. It is in this way that identity is tied up with representation. These images of congruity are often an attempt to provide a comprehensible unity in place of the sense of deficit that normally accompanies displacement. The Vietnamese describe their shattered histories, the ‘loss of identity’ which has been integral to the Vietnamese experience, as something that can only be repaired through the forging of linkages with others who share the experience of displacement. These actions of identification also reflect the desire to counteract the influences of a field of representations that have been recreated within the hegemonic discourses of the non-Vietnamese world and within the changed political system of the unified Vietnam.

After Cuong Vo’s speech, the three most prominent speeches representing the three tiers of government, were from the Fairfield mayor, Tony Campolongo; the State Minister for Ethnic Affairs, Michael Photios; and Bob Carr who was then the leader of the NSW Opposition. The Fairfield Mayor, Tony Campolongo spoke first and promised to speed up the application process for the development approval for a community centre, while also mentioning the multicultural nature of the local area. The State Minister for Ethnic and Multicultural Affairs Michael Photios said,

*It was twenty years ago that we as a nation, a multicultural nation, the best multicultural nation in the world, welcomed ... 300,000 Vietnamese into Australia, here, in Sydney, and here in Fairfield ... the*
epicentre of the Vietnamese community of Australia. This is not just Vietnamese, and this festival is not just Vietnamese, it is multicultural, bringing everyone together.

Michael Photios also urged the Mayor to rush through the development application. Bob Carr thanked people for voting for Reba Meagher in the latest elections saying it was a great vote for 'democracy', picking up the key word of the Vietnamese Community leader's speech, and spoke of the admirable qualities of the Vietnamese people,

*I want to say that I praise the Vietnamese community in this state, I want to praise you for your commitment to your families and your dedication to the education of your children. I praise you because despite stories in the media the Vietnamese community is a law-abiding community.*

In just a few sentences, politicians revealed several key aspects of the relationship of the Vietnamese community to the wider society. Both the mayor and the minister mentioned that Vietnamese people were one of many ethnic groups in the area. The Minister even suggested that the Tet was not Vietnamese, but rather, multicultural. The message conveyed was that Vietnamese could not claim the area nor special status. His statement also signified that although Fairfield was the 'epicentre' of the Vietnamese community in Australia, their ethnicity should be muted for the greater good, multiculturalism. The leader of the Opposition kept his speech confined to mention of 'family' and to 'the education of children', while also mentioning the 'law-abiding' nature of the community. These speeches thus revealed subtle messages directed at the Vietnamese community by mainstream political leaders, messages that signalled to the community the need to shift their ethnic identification to a multicultural social world, while being persuaded to remain family-oriented, education-focused, and law-abiding. The Tet speech of Cuong Vo reveals a reinforcement of political commitment to anti-communism to the Vietnamese, framed as a love of democracy to the non-Vietnamese people present. While only touching upon the social problem of unemployment, Cuong Vo was effectively denying the presence of other social problems. He also used this opportunity to urge governments to assist refugees in South East Asian camps, and to struggle for democracy in Vietnam. The politicians, on the other hand, sent out a message about control, urging the community to act in defined ways, and to not put their claims forward. Tet was thus used as both an affirmation of political refugee status on the
part of the community, and a social directive on the part of the politicians. Furthermore, each and every speech mentioned the delayed granting of development approval for a Vietnamese Community and Cultural Centre, a centre which had been described to me by the leader of the Vietnamese Community, Cuong Vo as the ‘home’ of the Vietnamese Australians, and as a little piece of Vietnam in an Australian city. The mainstream granting of space and releasing of control was played out in this public forum as was the request for that space by the leader of the Vietnamese Community Organisation. Within days the development application was granted. The public Tet had therefore been a successful stage for the resolution of claims upon the mainstream political body for a cultural home.

Discussion

Although Tet in Vietnam was the most important family event in the year for Vietnamese people in Vietnam, its transformation through migration has changed it markedly. In the process of migration, Tet has become a mechanism for the incorporation of Vietnamese people into Australian political life. In Sydney, Tet is the major public Vietnamese event in the community calendar, and is marketed as an aesthetic ‘ethnic’ recreational activity. Tet is a signal, to mainstream society of the Vietnamese presence in Australia, at the same time as it a moment of recollecting Vietnam, and of being an expression of a political strength on the part of the Vietnamese Community Organisation. Where in Vietnam Tet is a private celebration in people’s homes, in Australia, Tet marks the only public coming together of large number of Vietnamese people. The use of public space for such an event is the only way of creating an image of Vietnamese people as having solidarity and political power, at the same time as being a venue for reassertion to both Vietnamese community and to mainstream political leaders of ‘values’ that are labelled typically Vietnamese. At the same time Tet is also a moment for reflection on the loss of one’s homeland. While the majority of Vietnamese people do not attend the public festival, the private Tet celebrations are mostly experienced as sad events. Tet has thus become a public marking of Vietnamese people as a distinct group with a political will, and privately as a moment that concentrates the sense of separation from Vietnam. Tet reveals the dynamics through which the narratives, symbolic spaces, and collective imagination of communal identity are reproduced. Tet is thus
emblematic of both an array of associations with a mythic past as well as aspirations for a prosperous future.
Chapter 10

Living with Legends

Vietnamese-Australian women and the past

I had been talking to Van and her sister Chau for an hour or two in Mai’s apartment in Cabramatta in Sydney’s outer western suburbs, when someone knocked urgently on Mai’s door. Van opened the door to find her friend Hong looking distressed and shaken. I had never met Hong before. Clearly agitated, she was impatient to get the formalities of introduction over quickly. And then relieved, she burst into tears, saying over and over,

I’ve left my husband. I’ve finally left him. I walked out. You hear me?
I left my husband.

Van and Chau shook their heads and looked sad and quietly disturbed. They allowed Hong to tell her story,

I was totally fed up with him. Always coming home drunk, using up my hard earned money. I work from 5 in the morning until 9 or 10 at night. He is never home to help me. He never disciplines the children.
He does nothing for us so what is the point of staying?

She looked pleadingly at her two friends. Van and Chau looked downward, still shaking their heads slowly. They appeared to be extremely disappointed.

Hong later told me that when they had lived in Saigon her husband Tuan had been a corporal in the army. When he came to Australia his poor English and lack of formal qualifications led to long periods of unemployment. Whenever he had employment it was small jobs for Vietnamese friends who had businesses, or work in factories. It was Hong who had taken over the role of family provider. Although her English was also not good, through a friend she had managed to get a job sewing for a clothing manufacturer soon after her arrival. This meant long hours for low pay. Her duties at home increased her workload enormously. She took in ironing to get extra money. She said that her husband’s power and influence in the family had been gradually eroded through the absence of an ability to provide for Hong and her children.
Now Hong continued the story in an attempt to convince her friends that she had done the right thing but Van and Chau still showed extreme disapproval. Van made Vietnamese tea and placed a cup before us all, listening to Hong’s sobs and criticisms of her husband all the while. After the tea, Van finally spoke.

_You are upset today but tomorrow you will feel differently. You must go back home and be a good wife. You don’t want your children to have no father._

She paused and held onto Hong’s arm.

_Think of your parents back in Vietnam. What will they think of their daughter leaving a marriage?_

Hong listened carefully, drying her eyes and composing herself. In a total reversal of her earlier resolve, she said, without seeming to need any further time for consideration,

_All right I’m going back. But how can I get him to change?_

The sudden and dramatic change of direction of Hong made me realise that this was the real object of her visit. Excitedly and enthusiastically the three women now talked for several hours about the possibilities of saving the marriage. Chau made a contribution that was the turning point. She offered to get her husband, who worked in a Vietnamese restaurant at nights, to get Tuan, Hong’s husband, out of the house more and try to get him some work in the restaurant. Both Mai’s husband and Chau’s husband would have a talk with Tuan and persuade him to spend more time with his children. By late afternoon Hong left in a happy mood. After she had gone I asked Van and Chau why she had so dramatically changed her mind about saving the marriage. Chau said,

_Oh that Hong is always saying she is leaving her husband. She doesn’t really want to. Vietnamese people don’t believe in divorce. It shames their family too much. Many women threaten to leave then all their friends gather around and help them to stay._

The two women explained that over time, Vietnamese men were changing in Australia, that they had wanted to hold on to their position of power within the family but that they could no longer do that here. In Australia, men often lacked the employment or finances consistent with their traditional position as head of the Vietnamese household. Women had more influence than they had in Vietnam and now had bargaining power to institute changes in gender relations within the family.
What was evident to me was that Hong’s story was not unusual. Vietnamese women frequently uphold what they consider to be the ‘traditional’ values from their former lives in Vietnam, at the same time as attempting to subvert the position of male authority and power within the family. I will also indicate that by maintaining a continuous engagement with, and mirroring of, the legendary exploits of Vietnamese female heroes, diasporic women maintain what they perceive to be the ‘strength’ of Vietnamese womanhood. The female power evoked in Vietnamese myth and history masks and preserves women’s inferior status within the family and wider society by depicting the real strength of women as the ability to act selflessly within familial relationships and to endure loss and hardship silently. Ideologies of Vietnamese womanhood link women’s actions in the diaspora to the historical past and to their homeland, as well as providing them with a position of separation and distancing from mainstream Australian society. This section thus explores the way that responses to migration often reflect the ability to simultaneously inhabit several worlds, and how the places of the imagination within the mythic past may be experienced in the present.

The stories of Hong and other women illustrate the differing constructions of Vietnamese womanhood encoded in social practice. Vietnamese women of all ages actively construct this discourse on Vietnamese womanhood, but are also influenced by that construction. In the process of a transformation of identities that is intrinsic to both history and to the migration process, the activities of migrant women frequently incorporate critiques of the othering processes that operate within their social realms. The identity of Vietnamese women is always in process, and is continually shifting in relation to Vietnamese men in Australia, to Vietnam, and to wider Australian society. Vietnamese ideologies of sexual differentiation are both contested and transformed within the new relations of power that are created in the diaspora experience. In this exploration into the role that different inter-relationships and spaces play in formulating the responses of migrant peoples I am seeking to understand how individuals can live in several spaces at the one time, and how they also may reflect different layers of understanding at different moments.

In this chapter, I will examine the attempts by Vietnamese women to resist marginalisation through their re-interpretations of notions of Vietnamese
womanhood', which they may do through the practice of participating in informal networks. I will also indicate that in spite of strongly influencing the behaviour of others, Vietnamese women's actions frequently do not directly challenge what they consider to be 'traditional' Vietnamese gender relations. Interpreting informal networks purely as strategies for resistance is thus problematic. I will first reveal how Vietnamese women have constructed their own history and how they perceive and imagine 'women of Vietnam'. I will then examine the marginalisation process that they undergo as they become 'migrant women', and how this relates to their positioning in the state, to the wider social environment they find themselves in, to their ideas about the position of women in Vietnam, and to western feminisms.

Vietnamese women in history

Myths, legends, and songs of Vietnam are known by almost all Vietnamese who were adolescent or older when they left Vietnam. The speech of many Vietnamese-Australians is peppered with proverbs and folktales. Most claim that these legends and stories arose from a rural tradition where the oral tradition was privileged over the written one. Whatever the cultural origins of the oral legacy, it continues to have a pervasive presence in the language of overseas Vietnamese, and stories and proverbs are often viewed as important reminders of Vietnam as well as pathways through which people can understand their experience. In describing the manner in which family histories are entwined with national narratives, Van said,

When I was a child in Vietnam, we sat around many evenings listening to our grandmothers tell us stories. The lives of ancestors, historical figures, neighbours and friends became all mixed up together. Death and suffering was a feature of most stories. The difficulties of our country was tied up with the struggles in people's lives. You can't separate them.

Van had been told as a child that one of her distant ancestors was a woman called Bui Thi Xuan. Bui Thi Xuan had in former times been an important strategist in the Tay Son Rebellion (1771–1802), a revolt against a corrupt administration in the late eighteenth century. She had later successfully led Vietnamese warriors against the Chinese. After the battle with the Chinese army there was a counter-attack by the
usurped feudal emperor on the Tay Son forces and Bui Thi Xuan’s children were killed in front of her. At this moment, while suffering the loss of her children, she managed to fight back against her enemies. She was sentenced to be trampled to death by an elephant. When Van was a child in Vietnam, she had been told by her father to follow in Bui Thi Xuan’s footsteps, to selflessly fight for her country, without showing pain. The mythologies of Vietnamese womanhood such as the story of Bui Thi Xuan circulate continuously in the Vietnamese diaspora communities, and mark their beginnings in the exemplary role women are said to have had in the process of establishing and defending the Vietnamese nation almost 2,000 years ago (Quang 1994:5). Le Ly Hayslip, a Vietnamese-American who wrote the celebrated autobiography of life in two worlds, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places, continually refers in her work to women warriors of Vietnam, and like Van, had been told to attempt to emulate her female hero-ancestor. She writes: ‘...I learned how one of my distant ancestors, a woman named Phung Thi Chinh, led Vietnamese fighters against the Han. In one battle, even though she was pregnant and surrounded by Chinese, she delivered the baby, tied it to her back, and cut her way to safety wielding a sword in each hand. I was amazed at this warrior’s bravery and impressed that I was her descendant. Even more, I was amazed and impressed by my father’s pride in her accomplishments (she was, after all, a humble female), and his belief that I was worthy of her example. ‘Con phai theo got chan co ta’ (Follow in her footsteps) he said.’ (Hayslip 1989:29).

Within the theme of Vietnamese women’s shouldering of responsibility in times of war and peace, these mythologies present three important images of Vietnamese womanhood. The first is as an economic contributor; planting, cooking and selling merchandise. This image is revealed not only in women’s stories of Vietnam but in paintings in the houses of Vietnamese families, and in the poetry and novels that are widely read and shared with friends and family. The second image is of women raising their children in the absence of men; in wartime women frequently stayed

75 This torture was a traditional punishment for women who had committed adultery (Bergman, 1975:32). The analogy that was made between serving a regime and being loyal to one’s husband is apparent in the sentencing of Bui Thi Xuan. The punishment indicates that rebelling against a feudal lord was equated with committing adultery. The Confucian ideology allowed parallels to be made between the faithfulness and loyalty of citizens to the king, of children to their parents, and women to their husbands.
behind in the village while their husbands were fighting. The final potent image is of women in wartime, and the most frequently mentioned women warriors are the female heroes, the Trung sisters, who led the resistance against the Chinese in A.D.40 (see Taylor 1983:38-9). Another well-known woman hero was Trieu Thi Trinh, or Lady Trieu, who, like the Trung sisters, committed suicide rather than become a slave to a foreign power (Bergman 1975:30). The battles by Vietnamese women for their families and their nation are exemplified in many of the folktales, myths and personal stories that circulate in everyday talk. Stories of women committing suicide to avoid shaming their families, drowning to save their children, turning into stone sculptures while waiting for their men to return from war, all inhabit women’s narratives of Vietnam.

An Australian-Vietnamese women’s journal, Tap Chi Tuong Tro Tren Dat Mới - ‘Mutual Assistance in a New Land’, often prints folktales exemplifying women’s heroic role for its readership. One story, for example, was about Thu Kinh, the merciful protector of children (1986:32-34). The story tells of a self-sacrificing woman who seeks redemption for a crime she did not commit but who, nevertheless, maintains her loving, motherly nature. The portrayal of certain admirable qualities of womanhood is a central theme in most of the magazines and journals for overseas readers. The life of a woman called Hien whom I met in Cabramatta further illustrates the weaving of narratives of female heroes with everyday experience.

Hien had suffered enormously during the decades of political turmoil in Vietnam. Her family were refugees from the north in 1954. They moved to Saigon and she married an army truckdriver who fought alongside the Americans. After the fall of Saigon, her husband was taken to a re-education camp for seven years. For the first four of those years she did not hear any news of his whereabouts and assumed he had perished in the tough conditions. When she finally found out where he was being held, she took the difficult trip out to the west of Vietnam in the hope that the authorities would let her see him. After a three day trip in blinding heat she was allowed to see her husband for five minutes. When she returned to Saigon she discovered that their only child had died of meningitis while she was absent. When she was reunited with her husband she could no longer bear to live in Vietnam and begged him to find a way to escape. Finally, after making the journey out of
Vietnam by boat and spending a year in a refugee camp in Thailand, the couple and their new child were allowed to come to Australia. When I met Hien, after she had been in Australia for three years, she told me that she could not bear to be left alone and separated from her husband or children. If she was ever separated, even for a moment, she would suffer extreme anxiety and despair, fearing that she may never see them again. She had designed her life so that she was always in the company of either her husband or her children. When the eldest child first went to school she said that she waited the whole day outside the fence, hidden by a bus shelter, so that she could keep sight of her son. She spoke about her experience.

*Vietnamese women have suffered through centuries. I don’t want my family taken from me again. When I think of my difficult time, my pain, and my inability to let them go, I remember the legend of the woman of Nam Xuong,* and the stories my mother told me about ancestors from former times—women who bore enormous stresses and hardships proudly—the hard work and disease of many women. When I think of all these women of Vietnam I feel that my suffering is not so great.

Hien was always spoken about in glowing terms by other women, and also by men. She was revered by all in the community. On the sliding scale of Vietnamese womanhood Hien was seen as close to the *ideal Vietnamese woman* as one could get, one man had told me. This was because she had endured hardships stoically but also because she so clearly continued to hold a desperate need for the presence of her husband and children. When a young Vietnamese social worker heard about Hien’s difficulty in being alone and tried to seek counselling help for her, Hien refused to be helped. She felt that the social worker was being cruel in attempting to make her endure separations from her family. Her husband supported her in this. He told me—he felt privileged to have such a woman as a wife and indicated that other men were somewhat jealous.

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76 The legend of the woman of Nam Xuong is the tale of a woman who waited with her young son for her husband to return from war. She told the child that he should think of his father every night when the shadows fell upon the land. When her husband returned after two years he accused his wife of sleeping with other men. This was because he had asked his young son if he knew who his father was. The child had replied ‘my father comes every night’. The husband assumed his wife had been seeing another man and murdered her in fury. After her death the villages erected a temple in the woman’s honour, to remember a dutiful wife, wrongfully accused of adultery.
That Hien’s story is unusual and that she is held in such esteem is indicative of the gradual erosion of family attachments through migration and the general view that these changes are undesirable. For most women, the process of migration has reduced their economic dependence upon their husbands. Over the lifetime of most adult Vietnamese women, demographic changes in Vietnam, along with war and rapid urbanisation, had already acted to weaken ties within the traditional patrilineal extended family. In particular, the massive movement of people from rural to city areas since the 1950s led to the development of different forms of social organisation. The changes in conceptualisations of the patrilineage did not immediately transform power relations within the family as men in urban Vietnam still generated most of the income for their families. Although women were almost always involved in decision-making and very frequently generated some income of their own, men’s economic contribution was greater. As the family was also the unit of social welfare and there was little welfare assistance provided by the governments of both north and south Vietnam, strong attempts were made by women to avoid disrupting family ties. Women often stayed in unhappy marriages in order to be certain of both social acceptance and economic security which they felt only their husbands could provide.

Against a background of the heroic deeds of female resistance fighters and female spirit cults, women had to endure the often inflexible social dictum, ‘At home, a woman is to obey her father, upon marriage her husband, and after the death of her husband, her son’ (Quang 1994,5). The life of Vietnamese women was also dictated by this principle called the three submissions (tam tong); tai gia tong phu (daughter to father), xuat gia tong phu (wife to husband), and phu tu tong tu (mother to son). These relationships involved obedience and the submission of women to the authority of men during different periods of her life. These codes of behaviour also acted to prevent women from being outspoken about their wishes, and to defer to male opinion whenever conflict arose. The subservience and submission of women to men was sanctioned by Confucianism and was evident in every domain of traditional Vietnamese life, including the political, legal and social realms (Bergman, 1975; Ta Van Tai, 1983; Marr, 1981; Haines, 1984). The Confucian hierarchy of status, along with the rules of patrilineality and patrilocality, meant that although women may have influenced decision-making within their families, they were often effectively excluded from exercising power and almost
always remained subordinate to men. The legitimation of Confucian values concerning women occurred through the codification of the four ‘virtues’ (tu duc – desirable qualities) of women in Vietnam: cong (working skills), dung (demeanour), ngon (speaking skills) and hanh (virtue and proper manner). Legal codes in Vietnam rarely accorded women the equivalent rights of men, in relation to marriage and property. The patriarchal family system was a model for the entire society and this meant that positions of power and leadership were rarely held by women. The model of society perpetuated by Confucian ideals prepared men for the role of head of the family, the central organising institution of society (Van and Le 1978:42-3). The fundamental principles of Confucianism confined every individual to a social position within a structured hierarchy. The family was thus composed of relationships of unequal status, in which those at the top, older males, assumed a moral superiority over those below them, women and the young.

In spite of the constraints placed upon Vietnamese women and the circumscribed ways of behaving in traditional Vietnamese society, many of the stories and proverbs of overseas Vietnamese women indicate that there was always scope for a redefinition of values if the need arose. For example, as mentioned earlier, the Vietnamese narrative poem Truyen Thuy Kieu, The Tale of Kieu, written between 1806 and 1809, which is remembered and recited by many women, portrays the life of a middle class woman, and appears to justify how deviances from strict moral guidelines can be legitimated by real circumstances. Many older Vietnamese women in Australia know large sections of Kieu by heart. In spite of being forced into prostitution to pay off a debt for her parents, Kieu is thought of as a female hero and called upon in personal crises, because she manages to endure difficulties and still remain virtuous. Although she deviates from restrictive sexual norms she continues to follow the principle of filial piety. The story reinforces the benefits of respect for one’s parents over loyalty to one’s proposed marriage partner. If unusual circumstances arise that force women to behave in unconventional ways such as selling their bodies, women can still be considered worthy and honourable. The message in the tale of Kieu is that women may deviate from social norms as long as their behaviour falls within the overarching Confucian moral precepts.

To say then that Confucianism utterly denied power to Vietnamese women would be a misrepresentation of history. It is clear that the role and status of Vietnamese
women throughout history has always been in a state of change depending on the political, social and economic climates. As well as this, regional variations created sometimes quite marked differences in social structures. During different epochs, Vietnamese women gained and lost influence, becoming visible and then invisible. The changing statuses of Vietnamese women means that diasporic women choose to seize upon different historical female imagery at different moments. This reveals that among all possible historical views of women, certain figures and periods are held by the women themselves to be more critical to the identity of contemporary women. Certain narratives are more appealing as they re-enact women’s inferior social position at the same time as allowing legendary women to appear ‘strong’.

Vietnamese children are taught that the earliest Vietnamese society, known as the Lac society, was matriarchal, but that one thousand years of Chinese rule entrenched patriarchal notions into what was an egalitarian society. Although some scholars suggest that ‘women enjoyed a relatively high status in Lac society’ (Taylor 1983: 13), it seems an overstatement to suggest, on little evidence, that this society was matriarchal. As Taylor (1983:1&13) outlines ‘Civilisation arrived with a culture hero (Lac Long Quan) from the sea who foiled a continental power by seizing his foe’s wife (Au Co) and making her the mother of her heirs...’. Female power in this legend is held in the notion that inheritance rights were probably bilateral, passed through both mother and father. The legend suggests that ‘the children of Lac Long Quan and Au Co were divided into two groups, with half following their father back to the sea and half going into the mountains with their mother’ (ibid:13). The notion that Chinese invaders overturned the matriarchy and replaced communalism with an extremely rigid Confucian system creates the illusion of extreme difference between the two societies. The perception of difference between Vietnamese and Chinese society is an important feature of Vietnamese national identity and is invoked to portray Vietnamese women’s ‘true’ indigenous status as being equal and complimentary to that of males.

The strong and ever-present claim of a Vietnamese national identity in stark contrast to Chinese Confucian ideals often masks the frequently fluid roles of women during and since Chinese colonisation of Vietnam. While not denying the long history of

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77‘Strength’ and ‘stoicism’ are also seen as positive female attributes during the process of childbirth (see Tran, Ha, 1994:71).
women's subordination to men, it seems that there is a great deal of evidence that women had various avenues of influence open to them. Women fought for Vietnamese independence, were active in a culture of resistance, held considerable authority over their children, and were very frequently economic providers (Bergman, 1975:32-33; Hickey, 1964; O'Harrow, 1995; Nguyen Van Vinh, 1949). The role of women as traders and their involvement in different forms of commercial activity did not mean that they were able to completely control resources or dispose of family income however they wished, but nevertheless meant that their contributions to the finances of the family provided an important supplement and means through which they had some influence (Marr, 1971). This was particularly the case during the frequent absence of men in wartime, when conditions necessitated women's continued efforts to generate income and provide for their relatives.

The Confucian moral and ethical order did allow women some rewards in later life, primarily a position of respect within the family. This respect came from the young: from children, grandchildren, and from the wives of women’s sons. However this respect in old age was predicated on the inferiority of younger women over whom older women had absolute power. In-marrying women were required to perform many domestic tasks for their mothers-in-law and were not infrequently subjected to cruelty (Van and Ly, 1978: 53-4). According to my informants it is under this system that women found it helpful and often necessary to engage with other women in informal social groups through which they might deal with their difficulties and attempt to make changes to their difficult social situation. Quyen, for example, told me that after her marriage her mother-in-law became a tyrant and forever demanded Quyen’s attention,

...but I found the strength to finally broach this with my sister-in-law. That she had married into a family nearby and suffered at the hands of her mother-in-law in the same way helped me a great deal. We chatted all the time with other women, sharing our problems and helping each other in other ways, like finding work here and there for someone, or helping each other in our household chores. But the men didn’t like it too much. They would always complain that we were gossiping and spreading rumours. I think that is what they did in the ‘village communal house’.

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Scholars of Vietnamese social life, such as Hickey (1964), Hendry (1954), and O’Harrow (1995) have also found evidence that women’s power was limited to the family and that community organisation was controlled by men, who held public positions of power.

During the French colonial period, family structure in rural areas was frequently maintained. However, the large movement of people to the cities meant that two of the most important features of social life were radically transformed in the urban environment – the close relations within village communities was fractured as was a family’s attachment to the place of their ancestors. The lives of many of my informants were even more dramatically affected by the chaos that reigned in Vietnamese social, religious, and political life from 1954 until after 1975. Massive population movements, rapid urbanisation, and the fragmentation of families led to major transformations in family organisation. Families could no longer necessarily follow the traditional extended family structure and because of the precarious economic situation of wartime many families had to rely on other kin ties for support (Beresford 1988:57; Hendry 1960:64). Although women still frequently relied on men for economic protection, in the South the war and the associated massive propping up of the economy by the United States, provided women with an expanded number of paths through which they could earn money. The Vietnamese family structure was eroded considerably through the multitude of effects of the war not least of which was the absence of many men in the military. The most dramatic effect on the traditional Vietnamese patriarchal family was, however, the passage of more than two million refugees out of the country. This disrupted and fragmented already stressed family structures and exposed individuals to emotional, physical and social upheavals that permanently affected their kin relationships.

In many migration studies the story of an individual’s migration is often taken to be the story of that person’s life. It is as if only that information which relates directly to a person’s movement abroad is relevant in their new life. An examination of whole-life histories of Vietnamese-Australians often reveals a series of migrations within Vietnam, and a lifetime of adjustments and re-adjustments, which all took place against a background of war, economic deprivation, persecution and family disintegration. Most of the autobiographies are written by Vietnamese women and
provide positive images of those who have often been denied agency and who continue to hold a racialised position in Australian society\textsuperscript{78}. While there is a considerable amount of material available on the history of women in Vietnam, I will here use the oral histories of women in an attempt to reveal how gender relations are perceived among Vietnamese-Australian women. Vietnamese women’s own histories of their former lives in Vietnam show that, although by women’s own account gender relations have undergone major transformation through time, there are also many noticeable continuities between women’s lives in Vietnam and their lives in Australia. The stories which follow emphasise women’s sense of their own agency and their challenges to the hegemonic structures of Vietnamese society. Women’s perceptions of their ability to influence events in the past have continued in Australia. It is also evident that any strong sense of nostalgic longing for the homeland on the part of Vietnamese women is disrupted by memories of a society tainted by the powerlessness of women.

The following story told to me by Lien, a woman in her forties, tells of a life enmeshed in mythological stories of women’s history in Vietnam, women’s oppression in the Confucian family structure, and of the theme of flight to liberty in coming to Australia.

\begin{quote}
I was born in the northern-central province of Thanh Hoa. It is a very famous province because of a legend there about a woman warrior called Lady Trieu. Everyone was urging her to get married but she argued that it was her role to fight against the Chinese invaders, and that she would rather use her entire strength to overpower intruders in her country than to be a dutiful wife. When the enemy army tried to defeat her, she took her own life on the mountain top. A temple built to honour her stands there on that mountain today, the Tung Mountain. ...

You see there are great women in our history. What happened since those ancient times till now I don’t know... When I was a child we lived in a big house, and our paternal grandmother and grandfather lived next door to us. All around us, near us, we had relatives ... aunts, uncles. Not my maternal grandparents though, because they lived in the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{78} Examples of Australian-Vietnamese women’s autobiographies are Uyen Loewald’s \textit{Child of Vietnam}, and Nam Phuong’s \textit{Red on Gold}. There are numerous fictionalised accounts of the experiences of Australian-Vietnamese men, but few autobiographies.
countryside and anyway they died when I was very young. I was surrounded by women who controlled the money and worked hard doing extra jobs for their families while the men talked up big and went to fight. My husband was in the army and so he was not at home very much. The army did not really provide him with an adequate income for a growing family. When I was young in that house full of a big family I had seen all the women going out and selling things, making extra pots of soup to sell, or buying things in bulk to sell on the street. So I became a street vendor because that was what I knew. I sold tea and cigarettes from the sidewalk and sometimes found other things to sell from my stall. Whenever my husband came back from fighting for a few days he was happy to have the extra money. But it was not a happy marriage. He used to get drunk quite often and beat me, and I felt too ashamed to seek help. I just accepted it because I wasn’t so severely beaten that I ever needed to go to hospital. Once, to my great surprise, when I finally told my sister about it she said that she was beaten by her husband too. We convinced ourselves that they did it because of the stress of fighting in the war. So, you see, I had a bad marriage and I had to accept my husband’s drunkenness and beatings. But when the war ended he didn’t change. I saved and saved so that I could escape. I escaped Vietnam and my marriage. My husband remarried over there but I don’t want to. Not after all that.

Quyen’s story is different but nevertheless vividly recalls images of women’s place in Vietnamese society. Quyen was born in Hanoi in 1924. She had seven brothers and sisters. Only the boys in the family went to school after the age of ten as it was considered a waste of money educating girls. Quyen remembers her mother telling her that if she learnt about literature, as a girl, she would only use it to write love letters. Her parent’s marriage had been arranged. Although still very common in the 1930s, by the 1940s, arranged marriages, Quyen told me, were only common for country people (nha que). Quyen married for love. Her husband was from a well-to-do Catholic family involved in a business making traditional Vietnamese cakes (banh Chung). When Vietnam was divided in 1954 she went to the South with her husband and three young daughters, as did so many other Catholics who were fearful of persecution from the communists. The wartime and social unrest meant that from 1954 to 1975 the position of women changed dramatically. So many men
were away fighting that women had to fend for themselves. Quyen decided that her own failure to have an education would not interfere with her daughters' aspirations. She now had two more daughters. All five daughters went to French schools in Saigon. As this was extremely expensive for the family, Quyen and her husband had to work very hard to be able to afford to continue to provide this luxury for their daughters. Like so many northerners who had fled south in 1954, Quyen’s husband worked for the South Vietnamese Government. Later in the war he wrote for the southern government’s radio station, Voice of Freedom, and was also an adviser to the Australian Army on broadcasting to the enemy. Because of this work the whole family was granted Australian residency in April, 1975. The family has flourished in Australia, all seven children have university degrees and two have their own businesses. Quyen’s husband died several years ago. Quyen likes to influence the behaviour of her daughters and her son. In spite of the power she yielded in the family and her insistence on the education of women, Quyen explained this about her views on the position of women in Vietnam and the effects of history.

We all know that women are men’s equals in terms of their intelligence and their ability but I believe that we should give men the power to make decisions in the family. Family is everything. So, to maintain it we have to humour our men. I think divorce is very bad. Only the selfish divorce. They do not think of their children... The traditional Vietnamese family followed those Confucian principles where the family was extended, and the family was structured around the man who was the head of the family. Women were married at a young age and then joined the house of their husband’s father. The young bride had no power at all in the household until she produced sons...Ah, women were worth so little. When we menstruated we were thought of as unclean. Buddhist women were not even allowed to go to the temple when they were bleeding or after they had a baby. My mother used to tell my sisters and me that we should put chicken’s blood or red dye on our pants and that that would stop men raping us when we were in a dangerous place. She thought that would discourage them. It never did though. On the boats leaving from Vietnam many women I know carried some dye with them after they heard of other women getting raped on the boats, but they were still raped by pirates... The thing I
found most difficult about men in Vietnam was the show of male power. I feel sick to think of it. My mother was beaten by my father all her long life. I remember that when I asked my mother about her bruised face she would say to me that her actions had caused my father to lose face in front of others and that she had deserved it.

Another of my informants, Hang, told the following story of gender relations in Vietnam,

*Vietnamese people strongly believe in the expression 'the family is the foundation of society'. It is the family, not the individual, like in Australia, that was so important. What is considered to be an ideal family was one where there are strong moral values, respect for one another and where the father is the boss. While the father should provide support and guidance, women are meant to hold the four 'virtues'— skills at housemaking, beauty, a soft-spoken voice and good behaviour, as well as being under the authority of the male head of the household.*

The four virtues and three submissions are quoted frequently by Vietnamese women in Australia but are usually thought to be old-fashioned and oppressive. However, the notion of an ideal Vietnamese woman has wide currency. Single women are considered to be a threat to other people’s happiness, and are therefore regarded as being incomplete women. When I first met a woman called Lien, she asked me a typically Vietnamese opening question, ‘Do you have a family (husband/wife and children) yet?’ (*Chi co gia dinh chua?*). Before I had the opportunity to answer and to ask her the same question, she told me frankly and openly, *I will never have a child or husband. I have a heart defect and so cannot bear a child. So, she said as she looked downwards, embarrassed, no-one will marry me*. I later learned that Lien was a social outcast in the Vietnamese community. Single woman like Lien are regarded as corrosive to other marriages. She is rarely invited to other people’s homes and her social world revolves around her brother and his family. Without children, women are thought to focus upon their ‘unnatural’ sexual attraction for men which is believed to arise out of frustration and longing for a family of their own. These women are also thought to harbour vindictive desires to steal husbands and even children from other women. The social unacceptability of unmarried women and the associated pressure of women to marry and bear children, frequently create tensions between parents and mature-age unmarried daughters.
However, Vietnamese women have a greater choice in marriage partners in the overseas communities than they had in Vietnam. This is because of the marked imbalance between the numbers of Vietnamese women and men in Australia. While still favouring marriage within the Vietnamese communities, Vietnamese women are very aware of the excess of Vietnamese males and frequently comment that this has increased their status considerably.

Relationships to homeland

In November, 1993, while in Vietnam, I was invited to a wedding between Duc, a Vietnamese-Australian and Tien, a north Vietnamese villager. The celebrations were held in a small village outside Hanoi. November was the most auspicious month for marriages in Vietnam that year, and I had already seen many smiling couples parading in their wedding clothes around the city on their motorbikes. A small minibus had carried some friends and family members from Hanoi to this village wedding. The bride, Tien had only met Duc, her new husband, recently through a relative in Australia. When I asked Duc about the reasons for choosing a wife from Vietnam, he confidently stated,

There are few Vietnamese women in Australia who have not been corrupted by their lives overseas. I wish to continue to have a connection to my country to retain the values and lifestyle in Australia that I miss so much by being away. I feel that a wife from Vietnam will be untarnished, will only know Vietnam, and so I will not fear that loss of homeland so much. She will help me to remember my country and teach my children that they are Vietnamese.

The notion that women represent Vietnam, and contain the essence of the country is widely accepted. However, at the same time as they mark ‘tradition’, it is also the actions of women that are evaluated for indications of social change in overseas Vietnamese communities. Most of the Vietnamese communities thus look upon

79 Likewise, a Vietnamese-American who recently returned to Vietnam to find a wife commented, When a man like me yearns for a traditional wife, it is not so much for one who cooks his rice, cleans the house and watches the children — although that is part of it — as it is someone who will strengthen his memory, his mentality of the land he left behind... que cha, dat to (land of my father, earth of my ancestors)...(Los Angeles Times 19 September 1994:A1,A18-20).
Vietnamese women as the barometers of both tradition and change, of the past and the future. While they are viewed as the carriers of tradition, they are also perceived as those most at risk of abandoning Vietnamese values.

The dual nature of Vietnamese womanhood is evident in the attitudes about Duc and Tien's marriage. Both families felt that their children's marriage was a good thing for both parties and seemed to have little concern about the haste in arranging the wedding. Back in Australia, Duc's mother told me,

*I am very happy for my son because I can be reassured that he will be able to maintain a truly Vietnamese family life. This type of marriage is very good because the bride will be happy to have such an opportunity to come to Australia and improve her hard life as a woman in Vietnam. She can probably also help her family back in Vietnam by sending them money. Her status in Vietnam will rise by living in Australia, and Duc will have a wife who has been brought up to make her family the centre of her world. They both are very lucky and both families feel that the two of them have something to gain from such a marriage.*

After the wedding, Duc told me that Vietnamese-Australian women had expectations about the income and education of prospective marriage partners that were unreasonable. Duc had only ever had temporary employment in Australia and no tertiary qualifications. *Overseas Vietnamese women have a 'high price' (co gia),* he told me. This commonly used expression indicates that expectations upon men to succeed in providing for their families in Australia is high, that in order to satisfy one's wife, sometimes unreasonable demands are placed upon men. A Vietnamese-Australian wife 'costs' them a lot, both in financial terms, and in terms of their Vietnamese manhood. The wording of the countless advertisements for female marriage partners in the Vietnamese emigre press reveal frequent requests for a 'traditional woman' and indicate that the changing attitudes of Vietnamese women in Australia are often threatening to Vietnamese men.

In spite of Duc and Tien's marriage being blessed by both parents, many people in both Vietnam and Australia have reservations about such marriages. In Australia, women told me that the differing expectations of wife and husband would undo the marriage after a short time. This is certainly born out by the statistics, in that divorce rates for Vietnamese people are higher in Australia than in Vietnam (Coughlan &
Walsh, 1994). Stories circulate in Vietnam about women who married overseas Vietnamese men, but who waited in vain in their villages for the reappearance of their new husbands who had promised to return with the ‘immigration papers’. The fear of some women in Vietnam is that Viet kieu (overseas Vietnamese) men may already be married in Australia, and just want to have a brief affair in Vietnam. These men then exploit Vietnamese women’s desire for the possible economic protection that such a man may bring to their lives. Again, legendary women who have waited for their husbands to return are invoked to explain the lot of these unfortunate women.

Marriages like that of Duc and Tien are the result of the unusual demographics as well as the changed social fabric of Vietnamese lives in Australia and in Vietnam. Demographers have shown intense interest in the sex ratios of Vietnamese, both in Vietnam and in Australia. In Vietnam, there is a shortage of men in the age-groups where they most commonly marry but in Australia there is the opposite effect, a profound shortage of women in those age-groups. Demographers call this effect ‘marriage squeeze’ and in Vietnam it is the result of the imbalance of men and women because of war in Vietnam. In Australia, the opposite effect is the result of the migration of many more single Vietnamese men than women out of Vietnam. The marriage squeeze along with changing expectations of marriage partners has led to a dramatic rise in the number of Vietnamese men seeking wives in Vietnam. Informal and formal agencies operate in Australia and Vietnam for the arrangement of such marriages. In most cases Vietnamese women who marry in this way should not be seen as passive victims, but rather as agents who are actively manipulating situations in an attempt to satisfy their own needs and interests. The exodus of Vietnamese women from 1975 onwards is seen from two angles by most women settled in Australia. It was not only an escape to freedom with their male partners, but also a flight from a society of gender inequality.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, one of the most consolidating drives within overseas Vietnamese communities is anti-communism and the belief that authentic Vietnamese tradition resides outside of Vietnam due to the eradication of many former beliefs and activities by the communist state. One of the ironies of the vision of Vietnam as having lost tradition is that many overseas Vietnamese return to Vietnam in the hope of partaking in that lost tradition. When returning at Tet many
go to soothsayers and fortune tellers to hear predictions about the coming year. Some men, like Duc, return to Vietnam to have a marriage arranged for them. Arranged marriages are no longer common in Vietnam and my findings indicate that when arranged marriages occur in the overseas Vietnamese population in Australia, they almost all occur between Vietnamese-Australian men and Vietnamese women resident in Vietnam. This behaviour is indicative of the prevalent attitude that Vietnamese-Australian women are too influenced by Western feminism to make good wives\textsuperscript{80}. There are also a few cases I have known where an overseas Vietnamese family will sponsor a female relative from Hanoi to work for 6 months or a year in Australia in their house as a maid or servant. Here, the ‘backwardness’ of Vietnam is given a positive value when applied to women, as for some men it affirms their rightful place in Vietnamese society. Here, women are seen as playing a ‘natural’ role as the bearers of culture. Older Vietnamese women, many of whom are widows, are now being brought in increasing numbers to Australia by their children under the family migration programs. They are often kept in a dependent state with no English and little knowledge of Australian society to provide domestic help and to act as live-in communicators of Vietnamese ‘culture’ and language to young children.

It is not uncommon for Vietnamese-Australian women to return to Vietnam with the view of liberating their counterparts back home. Here the position of Western females is privileged over both the position of women in Vietnam and Vietnam’s own feminist movement which has worked both within and against the national liberation movement. Some Vietnamese women in Australia perceive that it was only the Western influence at the beginning of the twentieth century that partially improved the position of Vietnamese women (see, for example, Quang, 1994:5). There is thus an imposed polarisation between so-called ‘traditional’ Vietnamese women and the image of the Western woman as independent and liberated, and with relative autonomy. Here, the relativisation of liberation is predicated upon an image of the Western female as a reference point and Vietnamese women are judged according to how closely they approximate the allegedly free Western woman. The

\textsuperscript{80} Likewise, the ‘westernisation’ of women in Vietnam is often roundly condemned in the Vietnamese press. Marr (1996:38) gives the following example that appeared in the Vietnamese publication for women \textit{Phu Nu}, 27 Jan, 1996, ‘...a young female physician was condemned as a ‘westernised daughter-in-law’ when she filed for separation after being struck by her husband in an argument over her coming home late from foreign language class rather than attending to the needs of his family’.
self-perception of many Vietnamese-Australian women is that they are agents who
have transcended victimhood by migrating. In reality the differences between
women’s status in Vietnam and Australia are not at all clear. Certainly, migration is
not always an act that accords Vietnamese women the nebulous concept of
‘freedom’ and should rather be seen as part of a process that shifts the balance of
power so that roles can be renegotiated.

**Gendered representations of Vietnamese migrants**

The stories told by Vietnamese women in Australia also speak of the marginalised
position of Vietnamese people in Australia. The liminality and uncertainty that is
experienced by them is, in part, due to the hostility directed towards them by
mainstream society. As indicated earlier, the dominant image of Vietnamese in
Australia is gendered and has been of a masculine world of violence, drugs and
crime, and of a homogeneous community that immediately responds to attack by a
‘wall of silence’. Behind the alleged ‘wall of silence’ the primary image has been of
a community rife with tensions and aggression, attacking itself through communal
social self-mutilation. Vietnamese ‘gangs’ of young adolescent males were ‘urban
terrorists’ attacking the successful in their own community and unable to be
controlled by police (Four Corners, ABC Television, September 20, 1994). The
representations of Vietnamese are also caught in the stereotypes of Asian societies
that have persisted in the dominant discourse of the West. These stereotypes are that
Asian societies are hierarchical, underdeveloped and underprivileged, but also
capable of being subversive and destructive. It seems that John Newman’s death
was the catalyst for the expression of a racism in Australian society that is both
blatant and pernicious. The circulation of images of Vietnamese people is starkly
contrasted to the unstated notion of the ‘ideal citizen’ in the media. The ideal migrant
is one who is silent and invisible, who never makes their presence felt. Criminal
activities that arise in non-English speaking communities are immediately felt as
more threatening and disruptive than any equivalent criminality in the communities
of the English speaking majority.

Lenore Manderson (1990) has indicated that in the area of health services many
Vietnamese women were also perceived in stereotypical ways. She cited one paper
on obstetric risk factors that had suggested Vietnamese women were submissive
and subservient (Locke, 1985). Vietnamese women themselves are often aware that they may be perceived in this way, although they fight hard against it. One woman told me,

*When I don’t want to tell someone about things and they keep questioning me I go silent. They think I am just being a timid Vietnamese woman, but it’s not that, I just don’t want them to know. They are strangers.*

The ‘wall of silence’ lets us imagine Vietnamese women as the silenced ones, the victims, and the protectors of their violent men, particularly in relation to domestic violence in Vietnamese families. Among non-Vietnamese community workers ‘the wall of silence’ is a much used expression and has its antecedents in the notion of the ‘inscrutable’ Asian. The notion of ‘inscrutability’ will here be unravelled to show that although it is a term negatively ascribed to Asian women, it is often also celebrated by Vietnamese women and is illustrative of their resistance to dominant ideals of communication and inter-communal relationships.

**Women’s informal networks and the resolution of problems**

Having shown the impact of history and migration on Vietnamese women’s lives, I will now return to the opening theme, and further delve into narratives of female solidarity like that of Hong’s, the woman persuaded by her friends to stay in her marriage. Informal women’s groups and social networks of Vietnamese women arise primarily from the pleasure gained in communicating with others in similar situations. They are also useful arenas for the sharing of information, and not infrequently became an important domain for the resolution of conflict. The informal networking of Vietnamese women is not restricted to the family, and often extends beyond Vietnamese women themselves. Vietnamese people see the ‘person’ as more important than the issue and therefore, whatever a dispute is about, the solution must avoid shaming any one individual. Decisions are not made by individuals but are collective decisions within a family or with friends, and there is usually input from three generations in problem-solving.

Early on in childhood, children are socialised to seek advice and direction from family members and are told they are selfish (rather than independent) if they solve
a problem by themselves. Informal networks to solve problems are usually initiated by one or more women who wish to change a situation they may be unhappy about. They decide a plan of action first, selecting which other women will be informed and take part. The problem may simply be that money is needed to help someone get out of a financially difficult situation, in which case several women will pool resources to help another out. But frequently the problem is more difficult and involves extended periods of negotiation between women to determine the best course of action. If the problem involves a family dispute, usually the solution in which nobody will lose face is chosen above other possible scenarios. Mostly the network spreads to include numerous women who are not directly involved in the dispute but who will help their friends or fellow family members out. Often there are cases where in spite of women’s attempts to change the behaviour of others they are unable to do so. Most frequently women are attempting to solve problems between themselves and ‘others’, those who are considered outsiders at a particular moment. At different times depending on the positioning of Vietnamese women in specific contexts, ‘outsiders’ may be Vietnamese men, non-family members, non-Vietnamese people or the agencies and institutions of the state.

The accounts of women confer that the diaspora experience has significantly altered gender relations and has disrupted many of the controls on male behaviour that existed in Vietnam. While not denying the existence of violence against women in Vietnam, women told me that in Vietnam living conditions and the proximity of family members often had the effect of inhibiting any aggressive or violent behaviour of men towards women if it became excessive. In Vietnam, evidence of this perception of the domestic spaces as exposed areas of social interaction is revealed in the wide, open entrances of many dwellings, and the frequent absence of locks on entrances to houses. A woman often had relatives nearby to whom she could turn for support, and the spatial arrangement of villages meant that neighbours or relatives could monitor disputes. As families were often concerned to maintain the appearance of harmony, the living conditions in many cases prevented men from engaging in domestic violence. But in Australia, the distance between houses, the distribution of kin and friends over large areas, along with the high unemployment levels and social isolation has led to what some report as more frequent episodes of domestic violence.
This new social anonymity has had the effect of increasing the necessity for women to speak to others whereas, in Vietnam, many told me that events that may be damaging to a household’s reputation were not to be spoken of outside. In spite of a popular view that diaspora women have more means available to them to leave unhappy or violent marriages, to most Vietnamese people social welfare is quite a foreign concept and they frequently do not avail themselves of welfare services. The idea of wanting to help someone outside of one’s immediate family is dealt with as suspicious and the concept of Vietnamese community has had to develop in Australia as people have become politicised to life here. Vietnamese women believe that in Australia they have had to develop different means of influencing those in their immediate social world.

Vietnamese community organisations in Australia are powerful, predominantly male organisations. They get funding from the state to provide social services to Vietnamese people but are also frequently called upon to represent Vietnamese people to mainstream society. Indochinese formal women’s organisations arose relatively recently and are seen by most of their members as providing solidarity and support as well as acting as a powerful corrective to women’s general political invisibility. These women’s organisations, however, are relatively small, and mostly provide welfare assistance for women who are disadvantaged because of language barriers and the lack of knowledge of welfare and community services available to them (Tran, Anh Thu 1994a). The virtual exclusion of women from leadership positions in the largest Vietnamese community organisations has meant that women have had to actively engage in informal social networking to have their voices heard. Although the largest community organisations have few females in important positions, these organisations have the job of lobbying the state on behalf of all Vietnamese.

The virtual absence of any such organised community groups in Vietnam indicates that the migration process is a catalyst for the formation of organisations for both the welfare, as well as for the representation, of migrant groups on the political stage. The contrast between the formal organisations and the informal networks is viewed by many Vietnamese to be a gendered one81.

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81Historically, in colonial Vietnam the formal/informal contrast was seen in the relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. In this situation the French
Informal networks allow women to alter the behaviour of others in the domestic realm as well as in public realms. That is, there is not an automatic equation between informal networks and the domestic realm. Rather, the informal networks of Vietnamese Australian women operate at all levels of social discourse: within families, within workplaces, across community and ethnic divides; and also reach to families, friends and government agencies in Vietnam. One could argue that informal networks are always present in all societies, and that Vietnamese women are no different in this respect. However, although informal networks may not be at all unusual, Vietnamese women themselves often describe this form of communication as a distinctive feature of their community. Indeed, the degree to which Vietnamese women actively engage in these networks is remarkable, as has already been shown by Kibria (1990,1993), a sociologist who worked with Vietnamese families in Philadelphia, USA. Kibria showed that women sought out informal networks to assist them in obtaining resources to fulfil economic and social responsibilities to their families. While Kibria's work found, as I have, that women struggle 'to take advantage of their new resources but also to protect the structure and sanctity of the traditional family system' (1993:109), she does not mention finding analogies to this situation in the relationship between Vietnamese and the wider community. In Australia Vietnamese women also do not directly challenge their inferior position in relationships outside the family, and are likewise driven to preserve situations of unequal status in these extra-familial relations. By linking these experiences to women's deep involvement in an imagery of Vietnamese womanhood which sanctifies the suffering woman warrior, continuities and connections between narratives of the homeland and everyday experience in the diaspora can be made.

The development of bureaucracy and government organisation became the legitimate route of information and control and the colonised Vietnamese people developed pathways of resistance through informal, though frequently organised means. Likewise, the formal institutions of the state in communist Vietnam have been engaged against the family and its networks, operating throughout every layer of society. Corruption in contemporary Vietnam is now much publicised as the evil that is brought about by a reliance on family connections. In contemporary Vietnam, corruption through all levels of government indicates that informal networks may often thrive in state bureaucracies. Clearly the formal/informal network division is a false conceptual dichotomy which disguises many linkages between the two, such as the accommodation of the colonisers by many of the educated elites in colonial times.

82 See, for example Mackie (1975;1983:136) who has highlighted the importance of community networks of family among several migrant groups, and Bottomley (1975) who has examined networks within the Greek communities of Melbourne.
I will now describe some situations in which conflicts were resolved by women within informal networks that I have encountered within the Vietnamese communities in Sydney. Women's communal actions through networks frequently unsettle power relations in the community and in the wider society. I will use several cases to illustrate how women's networks operate, firstly in domestic disputes surrounding gender relations, then in the workplace, and, finally, in the relationship between Vietnamese and the agencies of wider Australian society.

Uyen was suffering great anxiety about her inability to return to Vietnam to visit a sick relative. Her husband believed that her going to Vietnam was a waste of money and that the money would be better spent on moving to a larger house. He refused to allow Uyen to borrow money. Uyen enlisted the help of her female friends to make constant comment to her husband about the duties of family members to each other. When this approach did not work, these women then asked the man's sister to make a plea that Uyen be able to return to Vietnam on the grounds that he was not letting her fulfil her obligations to her family. Finally, her husband was shamed into agreeing to let Uyen go but would not help her to buy the ticket. More than ten women then pooled resources to provide money for her ticket, which her husband was led to believe had been won through a Vietnamese lottery. In this situation Uyen achieved her aim, but not directly by challenging her husband's decision. Here, the women had collectively interpreted the duties of the Vietnamese family for their own purposes.

When Vietnamese women and men conflict, the issue often becomes one of an interpretation of 'Vietnamese values' (see also Kibria, 1993). I encountered numerous cases, for example, where women were unhappy about the way that their husbands applied restrictions upon their daughters and the women worked hard at changing the views of their husbands about how young Vietnamese women should behave. Nhung applied pressure on her husband Long to be less hard on their 16 year old daughter after he had grounded her for three months after she was seen holding hands with a boy. While Long argued that he was being a 'good parent' by his actions, Nhung and her friends argued that their daughter was a 'dutiful daughter' and was not breaking any Vietnamese 'rules' by having a boyfriend.
When Long argued that life in Australia was destroying his family, Nhung replied that Long’s interpretation of acceptable Vietnamese behaviour was incorrect.

In another case, Vy wanted to leave her husband because she was unhappy with his drinking and gambling. Like Hong, she turned to her friends who argued with her over several hours, attempting to make her stay in the marriage. When Vy finally proved to them that the marriage was indeed over for her and she refused to stay in it, her women friends organised a job for her husband interstate with a Vietnamese community organisation. Although the couple remained married, they have never lived with each other since the man’s move. The solution was believed by everyone to be highly successful as neither Vy nor her husband were thought to have lost face by forcing a confrontation and her husband never realised that he was being employed through the intervention of others. Vietnamese people often feel they will be negatively evaluated by other members of the community if they divorce. This solution not only prevented direct confrontation or challenge but also avoided divorce and a public breakup of the marriage.

Another situation that reveals the successful use of networking occurred when Vietnamese women negotiated a deal within their workplace. The difficult conditions of Vietnamese women in unregistered factories of Sydney and Melbourne have meant that few avenues are available for them to make complaints about their employers. Direct requests by workers for improved pay and conditions has almost always resulted in women losing their jobs. In one clothing factory, women improved their working lives by gathering support for change among themselves, and then presenting their employers with a fait accompli. In this factory, Thuy was chosen to ask for a wage rise for all the Vietnamese women working there at the same moment that they knew their boss had a large contract to complete an order of clothes. The employer needed them most at this time, and did not have the time to wait until he could employ new staff. The outcome was a general wage rise for all Vietnamese women in the factory. When I asked these women about the deal they had struck, they all told me that they would never go to a union or a state institution to demand an improvement in their working situation because they felt their jobs may be threatened if they did so. In this situation Thuy had directly confronted the employer, but only after the women had collectively informally hatched the plan over several months.
In another case, Phong, a young Vietnamese woman, lost her job in a bank due to restructuring. Her mother, Hang, arranged for a number of friends and family members to go to the bank and say that they wanted to open an account or to take out a loan but would like to deal solely with a Vietnamese member of staff. After several weeks of this pressure, the bank did reinstate Phong, seemingly without realising that the stream of Vietnamese women wanting loans at the bank had been orchestrated. There was never a direct request on the part of the family to the bank to re-employ their daughter, even though this would have been appropriate considering that Phong had been the only Vietnamese employee in a suburb of Sydney that has a high Vietnamese population. This example demonstrates that although women may have more power in the family than they had in Vietnam, in terms of the wider society, they often feel powerless and marginal. They usually comment that their reluctance to be seen as assertive has arisen because when they have made direct requests or followed formal guidelines for complaints about non-Vietnamese or the agencies of the state, they have never been acknowledged.

In all of these cases the pattern of behaviour is that Vietnamese women frequently uphold what they consider to be the Vietnamese gender roles from their former lives in Vietnam, at the same time as attempting to subvert the position of male authority and power within the family, or by contesting the dominance of Australian social practices and institutions. Most Vietnamese women in Australia assert that their situation is better than it was in Vietnam and that they have much more power. However, they are also aware that in relation to most non-migrant Australian women they face many hardships, are marginalised in the economy, and have an almost invisible presence in their own community. The experience of being liminal, and of being reticent about using the organs and institutions of the state given their prior experiences in Vietnam (where the state frequently instilled fear), is exacerbated by the response of the receiving Australian society. The response of non-Vietnamese, often rooted in the colonial past, has not infrequently been to treat refugee women as naive victims. This indicates that the condition of women in developing countries and as migrants to economically more powerful countries cannot be easily separated from the colonial experience, since the power relationships that were established during the colonial era between Europe and its territories are still recreated through contemporary othering mechanisms (see 219
Acosta-Belin and Bose 1990,300). On many occasions the networking of Vietnamese women is a response to this stereotyping that is steeped in colonialism. Here, Vietnamese women do not wish to partake in the activities of the general Australian society for fear of further marginalisation, and so they avoid direct conflict altogether.

Agency or resistance?

The informal networks of Vietnamese women are a way of acting indirectly to influence events. Many Vietnamese people feel that the way that they solve problems is essentially different from other Australians in that they look for a path that is the least confrontational. So Vietnamese women’s attempt to change behaviour in this way can be read as a strategy to act which, they report, still allows them compliance to the indirect modes of behaviour open to them in pre-war Vietnam, within the Confucian family structure which did not allow them overt decision-making power. It should be emphasised that Vietnamese women’s networks do not simply prop up an oppressive Confucian family structure but actively redefine the nature of the Vietnamese family and gender roles. The way that Vietnamese women resist their position of liminality is by reinterpreting Vietnamese cultural life for themselves. Women do not comply with what is neither a fixed nor a coherent set of cultural rules but, rather, contest and transform what they see are the values of the Vietnamese family. Historically the patriarchal family has been undergoing fragmentation in Vietnam for some time. The social turmoil of war as well as rapid urbanisation transformed the power structures of Vietnamese society. Intense renegotiation of power between young and old, and men and women is presently taking place in the Vietnamese community in Australia but this must be seen in the wider context of history and the pressures of the broader Australian society upon the Vietnamese-Australians.

Whether acting via informal networks to solve problems is a form of resistance can be questioned. In many cases it is the only channel that Vietnamese women believe is open to them to transform their situation. By not dealing directly with the state and its institutions, with the wider Australian public, or with other Vietnamese, they
are undoubtedly reinforcing their general situation of invisibility and powerlessness. However, it could be argued that by stepping out of the dominant power structures and not directly partaking in dominant/subordinate relationships they are acting outside the system, their own voices are being heard as an outcome of their efforts to change events. Both of these views have some valence. By communicating in the interstices of everyday life, Vietnamese women are engaging in a form of cultural resistance which has the effect of limiting the control of the dominance of others.

Many Vietnamese women believe that they have more possibilities for freedom in Australia because the system makes it easier for them not to be dependent on men; firstly on their fathers and then their husbands and brothers. Even so, women often expressed to me their fear of being left by men. The consequences of desertion are felt to be social ostracism and loss of economic protection. Waiting for the return of men has long historical roots and again, several legends about such experience are frequently referred to in everyday talk.

In spite of their increased power and economic resources compared with men, diasporic Vietnamese women frequently reinforce their liminal position within the Confucian family social structure. This stems partly from a fear of loss of the economic protection that men provide, but also from the notion that men are the key structural element of the family, and without them, the family itself would dissolve. The following comment by Hoa about the importance of sustaining a man’s position as head of the household is indicative of how secondary most women feel in the Vietnamese conceptualisation of the family,

*My husband isn’t a good father. His money disappears, he is always going to those clubs in Bankstown and coming back shouting at us. But I tell the children to respect their father, don’t argue with him, don’t let him work at home too much. I tell them you take care of your father, he’s like that because it was hard for him to bring the family here and leave our country and our old lives. They have got to respect their father because, if they don’t, they won’t listen to me also. Our family values will be gone.*

Hoa expressed the commonly held belief of Vietnamese women that if men are not respected then all older people will also not be respected and the Vietnamese family will no longer exist in the same form. In a study of his village and ancestral ties,
Nguyen Trieu Dan, a Vietnamese-Canadian, explains the position of women in his family in this way:

‘Our chronicle shows rigid adherence to the patriarchal system and to Confucian ethics. There is nothing about the maternal side of all our generations, besides the names of our foremothers. Essential information such as their social and family backgrounds, the villages where they came from, are absent. It is as if, once married into the Nguyen family, they were absorbed into it and their origins and distinctive characters ceased to matter. In the Vietnamese language, the word for maternal side in ngoai, meaning outside, while paternal side is noi, or inside. Our chronicle deals only with the latter, the side which is ‘in’...’ (Nguyen Trieu Dan 1991,140-141).

The notion of women being ‘outside’ the patrilineal extended family structure, reflected in language describing maternal kin as such (ngoai), sustains diasporic women’s experience of exteriority to the central core of the family, who can be her father, her husband, or her son. Women’s externality is one of a locus of assumptions that underlie conceptualisations of the Vietnamese family. Although most women born since the 1950s in Vietnam actively participate in public life in Australia as they do in Vietnam, there remains an image of women as the ones who will stay at home, maintain tradition, and continue to speak the language. This is particularly the case for older Vietnamese women who commonly speak little English and have a limited source of income. What are perceived to be Western conceptions of the nuclear family, and of the equality of partners in marriage, are therefore considered detrimental to Vietnamese family life. It is also often believed that welfare agencies and counselling services attempt to break up families and as a result these government services are infrequently used by Vietnamese women to solve family problems. The traditional role of the Vietnamese male as a protector of his wife and children allows many men to believe that they are also free to control and restrict the activities of their family group. Many Vietnamese families find Australian laws and social welfare organisations threatening to this form of male power and intrusive on their ability to discipline both their wives and their children (a similar experience has been noted for Cambodian refugees, see Ledgerwood 1990,291-292).
Likewise, Western feminisms are often viewed as part of an array of values that Vietnamese women feel may ultimately erode their own position within the family as they age. Vietnamese women for the most part remain aloof from Western feminisms, making it clear that they see feminism located in mainstream political movements in which they, as migrant women, feel unable to participate. ‘Western’ feminisms are seen as just that; imbued with the assumptions of the white middle class. Vietnamese women often make the point that they feel an inability to influence the debates of western feminists, which continue to categorise and define them.

There are many occasions that women’s actions cannot be read as resistance, when they actively seek a resolution in a conflict situation that reinforces their marginal status. Here women appear to act collectively to maintain patriarchal values which they frequently do not wish to separate from an array of values that they see as uniquely ‘Vietnamese’. Here, women may reveal that they maintain men’s authority because their own authority in the family, particularly over children will be eroded if they do not. Indeed the political arena of informal networks is not a public form of struggle and protest, but it can nevertheless be read as a communal and informal form of protest. This is not to say that Vietnamese women do not act as individuals, but rather, that they frequently act with other Vietnamese women to alter situations which are common to many of them as a group and which they can only change when they work in solidarity with each other.

Discussion

This section has indicated the ways in which Vietnamese women in Australia have viewed and transformed their actions in resolving conflict, against a broad canvas of their history, myths, and the migration process. I explored the notion that migration involves imaginatively placing oneself in two worlds at the same time, allowing people to effectively experience the world of the reconstituted memory in the present. The manner in which women connect their activities and responses to the past in Vietnam was explored to reveal that what is remembered is interpreted to fulfil different needs at different times. In the family women may feel ambivalent about seizing power and so frequently uphold the central position of males within the family. In the wider society women’s informal networks may reinforce their
liminal position. However, the networks also give them the power to alter their situation while still maintaining what they view to be the positive aspects of traditional Vietnamese gender roles. The flexible nature of these informal networks means that Vietnamese women respond differently in different contexts, actively molding their responses to the situation. Perceived restrictions placed upon women’s domestic life, sexuality, political agency and position in religion are challenged through women’s own agency. Dominant mythologies of the submission of Vietnamese women are challenged, but not altogether discarded, by a non-engagement in formal modes of problem-solving and by the fostering of cooperation with family and friends. I have attempted to locate Vietnamese women within a wider structure of relations, with their country of origin, with family and community life, with social and political relations in Australia, and with western feminisms. The experiences of Vietnamese women are fluid and changing and attempts to homogenise notions of Vietnamese womanhood are continually challenged by Vietnamese women themselves who respond to ever-changing circumstances in creative ways.

Vietnamese women, by unwinding both the mythic past and the present reality of their situations, contest notions of tradition and modernity present in the ideologies of sexual differentiation that occur in both of the homogenising categories ‘the West’ and ‘Vietnam’. Many Vietnamese-Australian women oppose the colonising influences of western feminisms at the same time as defining and influencing the behaviour of men within their families. In this way, women in the Vietnamese diaspora do not simply bridge gaps between cultures, but, rather, create pathways for managing diversity that resist marginalisation. The process of displacement that occurs during migration means that Vietnamese women must assume multiple identities that make them push the boundaries of the notion that ‘the Vietnamese woman’ is a natural and constant category. The political nature of informal networks means that the identity of Vietnamese women is always shifting and relational.

The desire to have positive interrelations is often at odds with a desire for acting freely as individuals, something which dominant society in Australia respects. The silences of Vietnamese women are clearly an attempt to subvert the authority of both the dominant discourses of Australian society and male authority within the family.
Here, 'walls of silence' are the sites of change, and of a resistance to incorporation and essentialism. Paths of resistance and change, although embedded in legendary mythology, are scripted by women. Here, the apparent threat that is written into descriptions of the 'wall of silence' of the Vietnamese in Australia is an empowerment of women to define their own forms of communication and change. There is thus a continuing dialectic between the way women construct themselves and others and the wider social worlds they find themselves in, which together constitute a dynamic discourse of Vietnamese womanhood. The positioning of the past is thus a strategy for creatively engaging with the present, so that women may choose to dwell within the mythic history of Vietnam for their own purposes.
Chapter 11

Crossing Over: the relationship between overseas Vietnamese and the homeland

This chapter deals with the question – what are the effects of displacement on the perceptions diasporic Vietnamese have of their homeland, and of themselves? Identity has become an issue partly because there has frequently been an assumption that identity is somehow seamless, stable and unchanging. Yet migration highlights the relational nature of identity (see Bhabha 1990; Hall 1990). When examining the Vietnamese diaspora, identity must be conceived within the locus of power relations that Vietnamese people operate within, both at a local and global level. The efflorescence of an interest in the politics of identity has come about through massive post-war decolonisation and the redrawing of national boundaries. Here, I will scrutinise how these wider relations of power act upon diasporic identities.

In spite of the passage of millions of people from country to country in the post-war period, the continuing interaction between the diaspora and the homeland has been absent from most studies of minority migrant groups (Bottomley 1992). To answer some general questions surrounding the nature of Vietnamese lives as they relate to the homeland, I will here examine the social and historical factors at work in the production and transformation of contemporary Vietnamese identities. These are often embedded in a discourse of resistance against the imperialising nature of western cultural practices. I will investigate the ways in which migration impacts upon cultural practices and how these practices are created and sustained, or manipulated and re-molded, in the attempt to empower marginalised ethnic groups. I will first examine the different visions Vietnamese in Australia and Vietnam have of each other and then indicate the ways in which the exchange of resources, both material and human, between the two groups, reveal strategies for status differentiation. Although there is marked variability in approaches to the creation of this difference, the wish to be defined differently from each other is invoked in multiple threads of the ongoing relationship between the two groups.
The experience of being a Vietnamese person in Australia is intensified by the shared experiences of kin along with the ties that language creates in the networks of social and political life. These linkages provide the articulation and point of recognition of a transformed identity. How this meshes with the changes of the homeland is the focus of this investigation. Here, I am not employing a static, habitual cultural category 'Vietnamese' but rather a Vietnamese identity that has been continually re-negotiated and contested. Contesting what it is to be Vietnamese by the Vietnamese themselves has taken place at the same time as images of the Vietnamese are created and defined in the wider Australian and global society. Identity is thus marked by the relationship between those within and those outside, the distinction between self and other. While in Vietnam I spoke to the relatives of refugees in Australia with the purpose of finding out what it meant to them to have family overseas, how it affected their lives materially as well as emotionally, and how overseas Vietnamese are viewed when they visit Vietnam, something that is now occurring frequently.

The everyday experience of the global

To illustrate the way that homeland continues to affect those who have migrated to Australia I will begin by telling the story of Mr Tran. Mr Tran lives with his daughter, son and their families in Cabramatta. Mr Tran was always silent when I visited the house. He would sit on the ground against an outside wall of the house, sipping tea and staring ahead with a blank and forlorn face. The rest of the family kept a respectful distance from him and after a few visits I too began to not even notice his presence. His daughter was always engaging and talkative and after a time began to tell me about her father. She explained that Mr Tran could not forget Vietnam, that he found it impossible to adjust to his life in Australia, and when he did talk, it was about his relatives and his former life in Vietnam. She described him as being severely depressed and told me that he complained of seeing ghosts everywhere. Mr. Tran was constantly being haunted by ghosts. Ghosts of his wife and children who had died were with him many times of every day and night. Ghosts of former friends and individuals from his childhood utterly filled his Australian life. In spite of having a large family around him Mr Tran's behaviour was becoming more and more introverted over the three years he had been in
Australia. On the morning of the 4th February, 1994 I received two phonecalls. One was from a very excited Vietnamese friend who lives in Hanoi. He told me the city had been celebrating the announcement, just hours before, of the lifting of the US Trade Embargo. The other call was from a Vietnamese Australian friend who expressed his concern that the Vietnamese Community Organisation in Sydney would have to have a major shake-up after the news of the lifting of the embargo. Almost all older men who had served in the South Vietnamese Republican Army, the leaders of the organisation saw their power whittled away by the announcement that everyone had awaited for so many months. A week later it was Tet and I called the Tran family for the occasion. I was greatly surprised to hear that Mr Tran had been jolted out of his silence when he had heard news of the lifting of the embargo. He had transformed his behaviour virtually overnight, had begun talking to his family and taking part in discussions and decisions, and had also tentatively started thinking about plans for his future, such as learning English. He even came to the telephone and talked with me. For a man who could not even greet other people over the last three years this was a remarkable transformation. Now I am able to forget, he had told his daughter, the Americans lifted the embargo and removed my ghosts. Mr Tran suddenly had realised that there was no going back to former pre-war times, that the American lifting of the trade embargo signalled once and for all that Vietnam had entered the global world and could never return to the past. How a decision by the American Government on trade could radically alter the behaviour of an old Vietnamese man in Cabramatta at the same time as it heralded the erosion of the power of a group of Vietnamese male leaders in Sydney is indicative of the way that global politics are intertwined with community politics and the everyday experiences of people.

This story also reveals the role that dreams play in reconnecting Vietnamese people to their lives in Vietnam. It is not uncommon for Vietnamese people to experience intense homesickness after dreams they have had, in which people and places fill their sleeping hours. In these dreams people may experience themselves back in the village where they were born, and be talking with people who are long dead. They may highlight a person, a situation or a sentiment, all tied irrevocably to the country of Vietnam. This desire to be linked in dreams with a former homeland is a common experience of displaced people (see, for example, Jackson 1995:49).
Until the occurrence of the fragmentation of the former Soviet Union, many Vietnamese in Australia thought of Vietnam, not as a place they would return to, but as an irretrievable country, a place in memory only, with everything they had known now extinguished by an intruding and foreign political system. Since Vietnam's necessary changes in domestic and foreign policy, the country has become more accessible to foreigners and overseas Vietnamese visitors. In 1995 the Embassy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Australia issued 30,000 tourist visas for Australians wishing to visit Vietnam. Of these 20,000 were for overseas Vietnamese. So, in 1995 alone 1 in 8 Vietnamese-Australians returned to Vietnam. In visiting their former homeland, overseas Vietnamese have been forced to confront a changed Vietnam. This transformative period has revealed differing criteria of value between and within the diaspora and the homeland that has led to changing self-definition from both groups.

**Political connections to the past**

The Vietnamese population in Australia is, due to many factors, not representative of the population in Vietnam. Most are from South Vietnam although half originated in the North and had fled to the South when the communists took over in 1954. Compared with the population in Vietnam there are disproportionately high numbers of Chinese, of Catholics and of members of the former South Vietnamese Army. The 30th April, 1975 is a continuously contested realm of meaning, read as either the liberation of Saigon or the fall of Saigon. However the reunification of North and South Vietnam is read, fractured visions of contemporary Vietnam from within the Vietnamese community in Australia were evident during the 1993 visit to Australia by the Vietnamese Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet. The arrival of the leader of their former homeland was characterised by the mobilisation of thousands of Vietnamese protesters to mass public rallies throughout Australia. Mock re-education camps were set up outside Parliament House in Canberra to highlight the human rights abuses by the Vietnamese Government. South Vietnamese Republican

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83 The Vietnamese government itself has contradictory views of the return of Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese). While the Hanoi regime feel there may be benefits in bringing the economic resources, skills and contacts of the Viet Kieu into Vietnam they are at the same time fearful that overseas Vietnamese anti-communist publications as well as other foreign 'social pollutants' may create social instability (Stern, 1996:19).
flags flew above Parliament House attached to huge helium balloons while the flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam flew along Canberra’s main thoroughfare through the city. Prior to the Australian Prime Ministers’ meeting with his Vietnamese counterpart, a delegation from the Vietnamese Community voiced concern about Australia’s relationship to Vietnam in a private meeting with Prime Minister Paul Keating. This visit divided the Vietnamese community because many now believe that this is the time not to protest but to develop relations with Vietnam, to visit and to trade, and to forget the past. Even so, many articles in the Vietnamese-language press brought to the fore the deep ambiguity that individuals feel about a homeland that in the words of one community leader, has lost what it is to be Vietnamese. The issues raised by this visit polarised the community around the issue of developing relations with their ‘homeland’. A striking aspect of many of the older people’s descriptions of Vietnam is exemplified by this comment by a former soldier,

_I think of Vietnam as having been locked away, not as just having fallen under a perverse form of government. The real Vietnam is here in freedom. It is our duty here in Australia to maintain the true Vietnam with its values intact._

Of course, economic and political structures in Vietnam had already been dramatically affected by the colonial process long prior to 1975. Nevertheless, one of the stated goals of many refugees is that, ‘in living abroad they can save their culture, while under the communist regime of Vietnam, their traditional values have been in danger of being destroyed’ (Nguyen Xuan Thu 1991:8). It is rare to hear older overseas Vietnamese apologising for their lack of authenticity as Vietnamese. Claiming the label ‘Vietnamese’ in Australia may thus sometimes refer to a custodial claim for an essential and original identity as part of its polemic. This political collective identity has thus embodied for some an exile pledge. Among many older Vietnamese in Australia, as well as some younger Vietnamese, thoughts of Vietnam are anchored in the confluence of anti-communist and nationalist values. For many, these twin themes form the basis of a connectedness with other diasporic Vietnamese who suffered in, and escaped from, Vietnam. The often radical acknowledgement of an anti-communist stance should be seen partly as a strategy of claiming legitimate refugee status in order to challenge claims that they may have come here solely to escape poverty (Viviani 1984:140). Such strategies are also attempts to challenge the image of migrants as opportunists that has been constituted
within the dominant regimes of representation in the non-Vietnamese world and within the changed political system of a unified Vietnam.

The multicultural ethic of contemporary Australian society has the negative consequence of stereotyping different ethnic groups and making imagined boundaries between groups appear more fixed and immutable. By reducing the multiplex nature of experience and personal histories to invariability and uniformity, images of ethnic groups are standardised to unproblematic norms of behaviour (see Bennett 1993). At the same time, a mosaic of divergent views within ethnic groups mean that these groups become more difficult to easily characterise by the dominant discourse. Differing opinions then become evidence of chaos, division and factionalism, a type of dangerous divided loyalty to Australia that threatens the stability of the wider society. That Vo Van Kiet’s visit revealed rifts and disjunctures in the facade of a united front presented on many occasions by the Vietnamese community was celebrated by many who felt that the moment had come in which they could express their diversity and lack of cohesion, when their positions were not essentialised, and when there may be an acceptance of the notion of a plurality of Vietnamese opinions. When the cover of *Time Magazine* (Corliss 1994) featured the differing opinions of two Vietnamese-Australian lawyers, the edition was sold out. In Marrickville and Cabramatta, Vietnamese grocery stores displayed it proudly next to Vietnamese language newspapers. One shopkeeper told me,

*We are happy that we can be visible, on the cover of Time Magazine, we are not all the same, we are not all unemployed in ghettos in western Sydney.*

The rhetoric of consensus is employed on the part of the Community Organisation as a tool for lobbying the state for more support yet the politics of the people generally represents diversity and ongoing transformation.
Huong often reminisced about Vietnam. By her account it was a lost paradise. She says,

*What was so wonderful was that we all felt so happy together in our families. Of course sometimes there were arguments, but I don’t remember them. I remember the Tets and the weddings, and I can never forget when twenty or more people in our family were together at our family home for a big feast. There were always children around, and the children seemed so happy. And we may have been poor, but we still had delicious food, and someone in the village, some family member, would always help us out if things were short. We didn’t have bills or this incredible amount of mail arriving every day with insurance and Medicare and everything. I just thought Vietnam was so beautiful. The trees were laden with tropical fruits and I loved the smells and the sounds of the whole place. I miss some of those things but mostly I miss that feeling between people, so trusting and honest. We all knew where we stood exactly. ... I didn’t travel around or anything, just really only going from village to village or to Saigon, after we moved to the South. This is really another world, and of course Vietnam is not like that now. The communists have destroyed everything. All the best people have left.*

Huong’s story moved between the idyllic accounts of pre-war Vietnam to Australia and to communist Vietnam, all the time setting up contrasts and differences.

Within the lives of Vietnamese-Australians there is an ongoing dialectic between the past and the present, between the there and the here, and between presence and absence, all of which are reflected in both domestic spaces and in everyday social communion. At one moment ‘home’ can be completely in the present, the place where people live, yet in the next moment ‘home’ can be in Vietnam, far away in time and place yet experienced as the origin of one’s identity in the here and now. Many of the Vietnamese-Australian autobiographies make no mention of Australia, a life told is the journey here and the most vivid and memorable moments of a life

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84 The word ‘nostalgia’ is highly pertinent to the migrant experience, originating from the Greek word *nostos*, ‘a return home’, and *algos*, ‘pain’ (Gates, 1995:92).
are in the past in another country. Through these three disparate aspects of contemporary Vietnamese-Australian experience, I will demonstrate how Vietnamese people in Australia engage at various levels with the country Vietnam, its history, mythological components, and present reality; how Vietnam occupies space in the diaspora; and how it is constructed at various moments.

Memories from the past may rise up unexpectedly through a chance encounter or a momentary experience. People may be drawn into the past through a fleeting experience in the present that brings the memories flooding back. Vietnamese people often comment that a smell, a taste, or a colour will carry them away to Vietnam. It may be green mangoes, mung bean cake, or the colour red at Tet, it may be peach blossom, a glance from another person at a street corner, or a helicopter buzzing overhead. Music can be a powerful and evocative means of bringing Vietnam into the present and plays a key role in reliving the past. Memories of the homeland are also reinforced by popular entertainment in the diaspora communities. Tran Quang Hai, in his article ‘Vietnamese Music since 1960’ writes ‘Since April 1975 ... the departure of many Vietnamese artists who had been living in South Vietnam marked the debut of the development of a specifically Vietnamese exile-music. This music, characterised by variety-show songs, may be divided into several thematic subjects:

1. Nostalgia for the country, nostalgia for Saigon (1975-77)
2. Resistance, struggle for the reconquest of the country (1978-81)
4. Renaissance of pre-war songs (1982-1985)
5. Birth of the Hung Ca movement (military songs) (since 1985)

The trend through the period since 1975 is to move from a period of dealing with a sense of loss and longing, through the period of suffering in wartime and after, to a revival of earlier music and, finally, to new music. Where in the village most public entertainment was conducted in the dinh, the political and social centre of village life, in Saigon before 1975 most people listened to music played on the radio or performed by street musicians. Few attended concerts. In Australia, the preferred entertainment place is the home, a trend that has occurred throughout the world since the advent of television and video. This movement from local community and
village entertainment to the private viewing in the home is yet another way in which spaces are used differently in Vietnam and Australia. ‘Paris by Night’ variety shows, produced in the United States, are very popular. Videos for hire of these shows are available at many Vietnamese stores throughout Australia. In late 1995 I saw one of these videos being played in a guesthouse foyer in a remote corner of the northwest of Vietnam. Many of the local people were gathered around the television set, transfixed by the feather and bikini-clad dancers singing Vietnamese love songs. I was told that ‘Paris by Night’ videos were more exciting and sumptuous than any Vietnam-produced equivalent. It was the first time I had seen a Viet kieu entertainment in Vietnam but it would appear that the popularity of such products is growing. As much Vietnamese music in Australia continues to reveal the extent to which people miss their homeland, it appears that a contrary trend is occurring in Vietnam, that products from outside the country may signify abundance and sophistication. The change from the commonplace public viewing of videos that I noticed in Hanoi in 1993 to private television and video use which was popular and growing rapidly in 1995 reflects the worldwide trend to home entertainment. Overseas Vietnamese however often perceive the change from small-scale community events to private entertainment to be a contrast between life in Vietnam and life in Australia rather than a historical shift. Here again, life in the past is seen to be constituted spatially in a fundamentally different way, where people joined together in public spaces more often, and for many more reasons than they do in Australia.

The pattern through time of moving from nostalgia and remembrance of suffering to new and different forms of expression has also been replicated in the novels and stories of Vietnamese-Australians. The topics of these ranged like the music from stories of life in Saigon before and during the war, life in re-education camps, escape from the country, life in refugee camps, and finally to new literature covering many topics of both historical and contemporary significance to Vietnamese people. There is a great attachment also in south Vietnam to the pre-1975 world. Some overseas Vietnamese claim that in Vietnam itself there is a nostalgia for the past. One way that this is manifest is through the appeal of literature. For example, Nguyen Hung Quoc, in summing up the literature of Vietnam from 1975-1990 says,
‘It can be said, therefore, that in Vietnam from 1975 onwards there are three types of literature: an official literature of communism, a secret literature of those who are against communism, and a pre-1975 literature, that is, a literature of the period before 1975 which is no longer productive but continues to be very popular, circulating well among the people, or as noted by Dinh Tran Phuong Nam in *Great Union [Dai Doan Ket]*, “it continues to be read, from one person to another, publicly at the stalls in the open market, on city pavements, in the hands of female shop assistants; [it can be found] lying among the high school students’ books, in the blankets of many adults who do not want to sever themselves with the old way of living, thinking and feeling”’ (1991:25).

That Vietnamese people still living in their homeland may long for a utopian past may well be a projection of the desires of overseas Vietnamese. In another short story published in the overseas Vietnamese journal, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (1991 1(4):63-64) the following comment is made,

‘After five years of ‘liberation’, Saigon people became immune to fear. They demanded to be alive, to enjoy life despite threats and restraints. They started organising small festivities such as birthday parties, engagements and wedding ceremonies. They celebrated both Western and Vietnamese New Years, Christmas, etc... In fact every possible opportunity they could have to gather friends together for eating, singing and dancing. They wanted to live again their golden past which now seemed too remote, or perhaps they wanted simply to forget the difficulties in their present existence.’

The paradise of the past is evoked repeatedly in stories of exile, however, in Vietnam, for most families I am acquainted with, paradise remains in the realm of the future.

The landscape of Vietnam is remembered by Vietnamese-Australians in various ways. As well as using pictures and calendars of Vietnam to decorate homes, many Vietnamese people feel physically connected to the soil of their land. Duc’s father spoke to me about his desire to have his ashes buried in Vietnam,

*All my ancestors were buried on my grandfather’s land. I can’t imagine being buried in Australia. I owe a lot to this country, Australia accepted*
my entire family when the war was over. My children have done well. They are all Australian! But deep in me, I want to return to my country, and the only way to do that completely is to be carried there after I die. I have asked my son this. I hope he follows my wishes. It is very important to me... It will mean that I am there in the land of my ancestors, where I belong.

Other older people expressed their desire to retire in Vietnam, but were often caught between the wish to be with their family in Australia, and wanting to return to their homeland. Their children usually persuaded them to stay in Australia often by convincing them that healthcare in Australia is so much better for elderly people.

The *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* is an Australian journal dedicated to increasing the level of understanding about Vietnam and Vietnamese people for non-Vietnamese. It goes about this brief by delving into Vietnamese history and tradition, and publishing articles and stories about Vietnamese language and tradition as well as about the refugee issues of resettlement and, sometimes, studies of contemporary Vietnam. However, the dominant theme of the journal has become to publish detailed accounts of a Vietnam long gone, to dwell in the traditional landscape of the past, and to remind people of their cultural heritage. The often romantic visions of Vietnam are tempered by stories of the harsh realities of refugee experience. The landscape of Vietnam is often referred to in emotionally intense language, and as a place peopled by legendary figures. In one article, Thai Van Kiem quotes some proverbs that refer to the land, 'Since the early times they have considered that nothing is as precious as land;

*Co dat at co cua* [Where there is land there is wealth]

*Bao nhieu tac dat tat vang bay nhieu* [So many inches of land, so many inches of gold] ‘(Thai Van Kiem, 1991:32). The idea of the emotional value of land is often the subject of a short stories in the journal, for example, one story set in France and published in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* in 1990, was called ‘Holy Land’ by Vo Dinh, translated by Vo Dinh Mai, pp. 119-123, and was centred upon the bereavement and loss of land experienced by refugee Vietnamese. While attempting to be a voice for scholarly endeavour into all things Vietnamese, this publication’s primary achievement is in laying bare the connections, and subsequent loss of grip, that Vietnamese people feel for their country.
While it is often difficult to ascertain exactly what aspects of the landscape of Vietnam are remembered, an ineffable sense of connection and belonging that is lost is apparent in almost all narratives and life stories of Vietnamese people. Because many Vietnamese refugees who left in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s personally witnessed the transformation of South Vietnamese society at the hands of revolutionary cadres, they are often less nostalgic than their 1975 cohort. While 1975 arrivals often wish to recapture Vietnam, most boat people who came later realise the futility of retaining attachments to a way of life they know no longer exists. Further, because their experience of migration was so painful many wish to distance themselves from the past. It is worthwhile to note here that for those in Australia who were born in Hanoi there is rarely a nostalgia for Hanoi, but only for Saigon, if a person moved to the south after the country was divided. This appears to signify a yearning for the promise of democracy, freedom and capitalism that the South brought in the 1950s and 1960s. The North, by contrast, was the symbol of the constraints of communism and the subsequent loss of freedom. Quyen told me that when she first arrived in Saigon after 1954, she missed Hanoi and the northern countryside, but that after a few years she began to feel more at home in the South, particularly as she is a Catholic, and felt that she would have had no religious freedom in the North. National allegory in Vietnam has, for most of this century, accentuated the differences between North and South and created and peddled myths of a wealthy, prosperous, indulgent south in contrast to a frugal north. Although there are clear differences between the two regions, the similarities are often glossed over by overseas Vietnamese to reinforce their political leanings. It is therefore the pre-war South that is most remembered and dwelt upon in the stories of the past in Vietnam. The attachment to Vietnam is thus often framed in political terms, as if the world that has been left behind is a world that was only ever one of hope and possibilities for what the country could become and what it was not, an opposition seen in the contrast between South and North.

**Identities through time and space**

Inevitably an erosion of consensus attitudes occurs in the generation of younger Vietnamese. A frequently heard remark by adult Vietnamese is *we now consider our children to be our homeland*. The consequences for this belief is that children are
often seen as the only hope for a different vision of Vietnam. Even though these claims are often made in an inchoate way, the ambiguities only highlight the fraught nature of ‘place’ in the Vietnamese notion of identity, as children very frequently no longer define themselves as being Vietnamese or think of Vietnam as anything but the place where their parents were born. Mr Tran’s 13 year old Australian-born grandchild told me,

> When it’s cool to be Vietnamese I say I’m Vietnamese. It’s very rarely cool to be Vietnamese, just about the only time is if I go with school friends to a Vietnamese owned shop or restaurant. It’s cool because I can speak Vietnamese and nobody else understands it and that feels good. Usually I am just labelled Asian and people don’t seem to care about where in Asia. I guess I define myself as others do; I’m an Asian-Australian. Vietnam means nothing to me, it’s just where my parents were born.

So, when children of Vietnamese parents comment that they identify with being Vietnamese at various moments, it is as a point of political articulation, and can be interpreted as a strategy for positive self-definition (Spivak 1987:205). This strategic identification may be an empowering moment to define themselves as belonging to an ethnic group in the attempt to represent themselves, and to appear within public consciousness.

For many Vietnamese here, life in Australia is frequently described as having two faces, one looking forward and one looking back. The pain of separation from home and family weighs heavily. The relationship of Vietnamese to their country of origin is extremely diverse. Ethnic Chinese have a different relationship to Vietnam as the Vietnamese government had actively discriminated against them and allowed them a space within which to identify with their Chinese ancestry. The Chinese-Vietnamese (34% of Vietnamese-born people in Australia) do not generally become close to ethnic Vietnamese and are held at a distance in social relations and from positions of power in the community. The Chinese-Vietnamese were conspicuously absent from all demonstrations against the Vietnamese Prime Minister. They almost all have painful memories of the persecution against them in Vietnam but they do not look back with the same eyes as the ethnic-Vietnamese. Most do not feel strongly about trading with Vietnam nor do they care about whether Vietnamese visit the country. Even though they may have been in Vietnam for several
generations before they escaped, they almost always feel more Chinese than Vietnamese.

In Vietnam there was a long history of discrimination against Chinese people and they had developed a separate and self-supporting network of associations. When they arrived in Australia there were already well-organised Chinese community organisations based mostly on people’s province of origin. Unlike the Chinese, the Vietnamese arrived with no community networks established in 1975 and only 900 of their people living here at that time. For these reasons, the Chinese-Vietnamese do not identify with a Vietnamese national identity as do the ethnic-Vietnamese nor does contemporary Vietnam have the same highly-charged emotional meaning in their everyday lives. Presently, the small Chinese-Vietnamese population in Vietnam (2% of the overall population) is once again achieving success in business life in spite of enduring great hardships during the purges of Chinese from Vietnam in 1979 (when China and Vietnam had border conflicts). Certainly that period highlighted various ethnic divisions in Vietnam. All Chinese at that time lost their jobs and were not allowed to receive social benefits. Because of that many Chinese people left. Those who did not escape were usually those who had married ethnic Vietnamese or who found it difficult to fund a departure. One such family in Hanoi suggested to me that past difficulties for Chinese-Vietnamese have greatly increased their sense of insecurity in Vietnam. Although not wanting to leave Vietnam many feel that they may be singled out again for victimisation. Thus, even in Vietnam, they identify more with China, or, rather, as being part of an overseas Chinese network.

Vietnamese people in Australia are often highly aware of the relationship that the Australian government is developing with Vietnam and frequently feel ambiguous towards images of Vietnam, feeling both part of the dominant discourse and distant from it. Since the Vietnam War, Vietnam has not only been represented as the noble warrior who permanently changed American self-confidence, but also has become part of the flow of discourse surrounding development issues in Asia. Images of a rural underdevelopment and poverty have now been replaced by the exotic ex-colonial paradise in the hegemonic representations of the West. Historically, the non-Vietnamese vision of Vietnam was dominated by images of the Vietnam War and its aftermath (Anderegg, 1991). Even before the lifting of the U.S. trade
embargo a new representation of Vietnam is taking hold, that of Vietnam as the open and untouched marketplace for Australian business. The fact that Vietnam remains one of the world’s poorest countries (GNP $240US per year in 1995) and that Vietnamese refugees have made their home in the world’s richest countries makes the financial differentiation between the two groups quite profound. The new emphasis in Vietnam on creating wealth is seen in frequent political messages like dan giau nuoc manh, ‘rich people, strong country’, and the preoccupation of the young in achieving financial success (Marr, 1996:3). There are many stories that circulate among emigres in Australia about family members in Hanoi giving up work entirely to live from the money sent by their overseas relatives, many of whom are affected by feelings of guilt at their successful lives and their poor relatives back home.

The prime concern to promote and protect one’s family means that for the Vietnamese in Australia relations with Vietnam continue even for the extreme anti-communists. Many people suffer a form of ‘survival guilt’ often striking after many years. I have found that the guilt is often assuaged by supporting family back in Vietnam. Sending money to Vietnam can boost feelings of pride in people’s achievement, even if their own material welfare has not significantly altered. The young are not always immune from this guilt. Most are keenly aware of the current political events in Vietnam and the relationship between their country and the rest of the world. The majority of Vietnamese in Australia are deeply concerned about the economic and social conditions in Vietnam and there is continued emphasis on the issues of family reunification within Vietnamese families in Australia.

The passage of a vast quantity of both money and merchandise that travels to Vietnam every month attests to the power of the ongoing relationship Vietnamese people throughout the diaspora have with their relatives in their homeland. Some individuals who have not seen relatives in Vietnam for many years constitute their relationship almost entirely in such a flow of letters, money, goods. This flow of packages illuminates the extension of the Vietnamese family beyond the boundaries of a single nation. Sending relatives presents may also justify for many overseas Vietnamese their own engagement with consumerism. For many, the exposure to advertising and participation in consumer culture is alluring, but is also troubling, particularly when they have remaining family in Vietnam. Although years of
poverty and food shortages in Vietnam often leads to an increased desire to acquire objects, this desire is tempered by the knowledge that those at home may still be suffering. The result is that the desire of many to be materially successful can be justified in terms of helping family back in Vietnam. And as one young man told me, 

*I cannot buy a lot of clothes. I feel that I must only buy the basic type of everything: a basic car, house, furniture. I try to get everything cheaply.*

*My friends always discuss where to get a good buy. If I spend too much I feel sick in my heart for my family back in Vietnam. Even the most basic lifestyle here is extreme luxury to Vietnamese.*

The sentiments expressed here are not at all uncommon. Even relatively well-off Vietnamese will go bargain-hunting with the view that they are somehow helping their countrymen by doing so. During a year of working with Vietnamese people in Australia I heard of one family only that has severed ties with their relations in Vietnam. The telling aspect to this story is that this family of husband, wife and children feel that they have been unsuccessful. When I met the husband I asked him about his family in Vietnam. His response was this:

*We are all suffering. Why should I send money to them. I need it more. Whenever I wrote to my family they were always requesting more money. If I get letters from them I send them back to Vietnam with ‘Not at this address’ written on. Maybe one day when my life is comfortable I will contact them again but not now when times are hard.*

Acquaintances of this man told me that he did not want his family to know he had failed and that his pride was injured. This is indicative of the way in which overseas Vietnamese feel compelled to represent themselves to their families back home as materially successful and thus as having imbued what is perceived to be the magic of the West.85

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85The association between the developed world and consumerism are in reality difficult to maintain because of the effects of global capitalism. Verdery (1992), writing about socialism in Eastern Europe, has some perceptive comments about the effects upon consumption when a socialist state moves to a market economy. She writes, ‘Socialism intensified this experience... for the regimes themselves paradoxically abetted the emphasis on consumption. First, organised shortage made procuring something - anything - a major triumph. Second, even as regimes prevented people from consuming by not making goods available, they insisted that under socialism the standard of living would constantly improve...Socialism...aroused desire without focalising it, and kept it alive by deprivation. That is, in socialism desire floated free in endless search of goods people saw as their right. ... The arousal and frustration of consumer desire and East Europeans’ consequent resistance to their regimes led them to build their social identities.
Vietnam belongs irrevocably to what Edward Said once called an ‘imaginative geography and history’, which helps overseas Vietnamese ‘dramatise the difference’ between themselves and those left in Vietnam (Said 1979:55). It is thus clear that there are enormous contradictions in the notion of ‘homeland’ to overseas Vietnamese and that many of their difficulties in assuming an identity are projected back onto family in Vietnam. A central question in the minds of many is thus, ‘Did I do the right thing?’ (in escaping). They are concerned that they should have stayed in Vietnam, especially as life there is improving rather rapidly presently. This question is projected onto relatives back home in that in order to justify a life overseas, many feel that they must contribute to life in Vietnam. In a not uncommon statement, a Melbourne based Australian-Vietnamese lawyer working on trade relations with Vietnam says, I can contribute more to Vietnam from Australia than if I had stayed there. This explains the common conception of their major impact on both the material wealth and popular culture in Vietnam. Essentialising the homeland, however, may be a strategy through which the Australian-Vietnamese experience of separation and loss may be counteracted. That is, the imposition of a fixed conception of the homeland by the diaspora may aid people in dealing with the fragmentation that they experience through displacement, by providing an anchor of stability. The irony is that this coherence is often used to to create a self-conception of difference. While often feeling excluded from channels of political representation in wider Australian society, Vietnamese frequently feel empowered by reflecting on their difference from their country of origin. While often feeling excluded from the institutional forms of power in Australia they often have a desire to distance themselves from their homeland and from their people.

specifically through consuming. Acquiring consumption goods and objects conferred an identity that set one off from socialism. To acquire objects became a way of constituting your selfhood against a regime you despised ‘(Verdery, 1992:25-6, in Humphrey, 1995:56). This analysis seems highly applicable to Vietnam where a growing minority are achieving material success since doi moi (renovation). Consumption has become a motivating force in the lives of many youth in contemporary Vietnam (Marr, 1996). Nevertheless, Vietnamese-Australians often think of Vietnam as being in a timeless socialism where goods are difficult to acquire.
An imagined colony

For some of the older refugees who left soon after 1975, one of the most persistent and sentient memories is that of the confusion and frenzy of South Vietnam in days surrounding the takeover of the south by northern troops and cadres. Quyen tells that,

*The streets were in chaos, everyone who had been in the army or government or had worked for the Americans wanted to flee, no-one knew whether they had jobs or not, and there was tremendous fear about how the northerners would treat us. And when they started coming, every job in the government was taken over by them, people who knew nothing but communist theory and propaganda. And all the people who knew how things worked were escaping. Everything we knew, our whole culture was turned upside down. Suddenly all those who couldn’t escape were being called to be ‘re-educated’ in the countryside. Some of those were not seen for years.*

It is because of this that the sense of fragmentation and loss on the part of Vietnamese who have left is not only for their family and the physical environment of Vietnam but also for understood values and familiar institutions, that appear to them to be forever lost. This means that the identity of Vietnamese people in Australia in some sense involves crossing the boundaries of understanding between countries with different histories, different political systems, different social values and different cultural mythologies.

The longer that Vietnamese people are resident in Australia the more that they find value is placed on things labelled ‘Australian’ or ‘Western’. They find that their degrees are valueless, that their prior work experience is not recognised and until they get Australian qualifications their educational background in Vietnam has no meaning. There are social, educational and legal benchmarks that deny many of the experiences in their previous life any value. Primarily these are English language proficiency, Australian education from schooling to diplomas and degrees and, finally, citizenship. As one young woman in Sydney put it,

*Gradually it dawned on me that a Vietnamese education is worthless and that Australian citizenship and an Australian passport are prize possessions for refugees like me who have had a life of uncertainty. We*
gradually change our values as our eyes open to this different system. Our behaviour doesn’t change – we are still Vietnamese but we slowly learn to reject all the things that Vietnam gave us as we take on a world of Australian value.

The Australian social welfare system allows Vietnamese here to have even more reason to see the political and social system in Vietnam as deficient. When they return to Vietnam they sing the praises of the system of social benefits and of the opportunities for education and for business. The disillusionment with the Vietnam they once knew occurs in parallel with the attainment of new cultural values.

This imperialist cultural relationship is reproduced at a number of levels. Vietnam is located in terms of underdevelopment, rural and urban poverty and overpopulation. It is frequently commented by Vietnamese-Australians that Vietnam is backward, both technologically and ideologically, that Vietnamese Australians are modern and liberal yet their counterparts in Vietnam are dogmatic and not open to technological and ideological change. Australia’s Vietnamese uphold such social institutions as free speech and voluntary associations as indicative of the fact that Australia is more ‘advanced’ than Vietnam. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (1993:12) has pointed out,

'the modern world of nation-states is ... a united but internally hierarchised world where some countries are described as measurably ... more ‘advanced’ than others. This structure of relationships has the nature of ... self-similar patterns – it is capable of reproducing itself at many different levels, between nations, between modern ethnic groups, between perceived races and so on'.

The Vietnamese in Australia have internalised the idea of an undeveloped homeland. This position belongs to the play of the global discourse of poverty and underdevelopment which depends on the assumption of 'continuous dominance of a European-derived, and English-speaking majority' (ibid:14).

The process of globalisation of Euro-American culture has influenced the Vietnamese in Australia in that many attempt to engage in a type of colonial cultural relationship with their relatives in Vietnam. Vietnam is very often the ‘other’ to Australian-Vietnamese, many of whom conceive that they are positioned at ‘the centre’. It is at these moments that they attempt to identify with non-Vietnamese
values and behaviours and make the comment that ‘we have changed’. The following comment is from a Vietnamese-Australian man:

*Back in Vietnam they do not understand the world at all. I give them money and they do not know what to do with it to make more money for themselves. They just have no idea about business or investing money in their own future. I decided that I will only give money to my relatives who can show me what they have done with the money that is constructive. Their thinking is very backward, I think they will never be any different unless they leave and study overseas.*

Here Vietnam is viewed as a society of slow progress, a social and political form which is historically and spatially separated from overseas Vietnamese communities.

This notion of the homeland as a metaphorical colony is reinforced by the financial dependence upon overseas relatives that those at home have had in the past. On my second trip to Vietnam in late 1995, I was aware that Vietnamese families in Vietnam are depending less on their overseas relatives for financial support than they did two years before. The new-found prosperity of Vietnam releases many from the bonds of their families overseas, and concurrently Vietnamese emigres have a sense in which their homeland has become more lost to them, as the bonds of dependence loosen.

Another component of the colonial relationship is the essentialising of identity between the diaspora and home (see also Hall 1990; Said 1993; Eng 1993). The diversity and fluidity of identity in the homeland may be defined by the overseas Vietnamese as primordial difference. As Nicholas Thomas (1992) has argued, during colonisation, difference and separation are involved in the creation of identity at the same time as certain cultural icons are made ‘emblematic’ of that difference. That is, in the history of transformation that is involved in mutual identity formation, specific practices are rendered representative of the other’s identity and condensed into cultural tokens. Tet, Vietnamese New Year, is one such emblematic homeland activity. Tet is seen as the motif of traditional Vietnam whereas, it is ‘materialism’ that is viewed as the emblematic activity of the overseas Vietnamese by the homeland. At Tet thousands of Vietnamese have been returning to Vietnam in increasing numbers every year. As already described, it is this period when many
Australian-Vietnamese feel that they prefer to be in Vietnam and that Tet in Australia has not the same value. Tet in Australia is a time when many feel their minority status and the lack of value placed upon their festivals except as part of a showcase of multiculturalism. That Tet has come to be one of the central motifs of Vietnam for overseas Vietnamese is not because it is more essential than other cultural experience to Vietnamese cultural life. Rather, as overseas Vietnamese people have been confronted with loss and a conception of cultural fragmentation, Tet has become singled out as an 'emblematic' practice (ibid:3-4). The context for the rising importance of Tet in the diaspora community is both the way that Tet is representative of family wholeness in Vietnam (for many, something now lost in Australia) as well as it being a vehicle for the replacement of what is thought to be lacking in Australian society. That is, Tet may well be singled out as a Vietnamese cultural event as a contrast, and a challenge, to what might be labelled Australian.

The resistance to total assimilation into Australian mainstream culture means that throughout the social and political history of Vietnamese and Australian interactions, mutual definitions have been effected between the dominant culture and the Vietnamese migrant experience. In the case of Tet, the Tet in Vietnam is seen by Vietnamese people as being more 'natural' as opposed to its artificiality in Australia. Likewise, what is perceived as the natural 'unnatural' nature of Australian society. This notion is reproduced at a number of different levels. For example, in the exchange of gifts between family members in Vietnam and Australia, the goods leaving Vietnam are most commonly unprocessed foods such as teas or fruits, or artwork, silks etc., while those entering Vietnam are most often medical drugs, processed foods and clothes. Here the natural/artificial distinction operates at a number of different levels, and reinforces the notion that Vietnam produces more 'natural' people, celebrations, and goods, while the West acts upon these and transforms them into something both more sophisticated and more 'artificial'.

These cultural constructions are also evident in definitions of 'values'. The pressure to maintain the values associated with pre-war Vietnam has led to the frequent conception by overseas Vietnamese that Australian society is a country of low moral
values, and spiritually corrupt\textsuperscript{86}. The divisions felt between mainstream Australian society and Vietnamese people are here framed in moral terms. The theme of moral decay and decadence constantly arises in Vietnam. Historically, the northerners criticised the south for consumerism and moral corruption during and after the American involvement in Vietnam. Vietnamese people were no strangers to capitalism when they left Vietnam. For example, the American presence in South Vietnam was seen by many as a boom period when businesses prospered. Many servicemen were viewed as vehicles for Vietnamese financial success, as high consumers, rather than as defenders of the Southern regime. The image of American servicemen as using prostitutes, drugs and alcohol in excess at the same time as being predominantly without religious involvement was an image that was held powerfully in the minds of the southerners who first escaped the country. Since then, the overseas Vietnamese have come under similar attack from those remaining at home and it is often said by those remaining in Vietnam that only in the homeland can one access the authentic ‘national culture’ (\textit{van hoa dan toc}).

While the north/south division in Vietnam was to be linked to the Vietnam/the West opposition in this regard, these links and boundaries are ambiguous and unstable. Further, what is thought of as extreme difference between the Vietnamese in Vietnam and those abroad is a decline on moral values, while in actuality, people within Vietnam decry this transformation within their own country. For example, in discussing the contemporary northern writer, Nguyen Huy Thiep, Nguyen Hung Quoc writes (1991:22),

‘The majority of his short stories concentrated on one main theme: criticising the alienation of man under the socialist regime... Nguyen Huy Thiep pitilessly unveiled all the misery, degradation, and ridicule of mankind and the complete collapse of morals and feelings between men. Money reigned supreme ... There was no brotherhood, no fraternal feelings. There was no love, no feelings between husband and wife. Only trifling and mean calculations about money.’

\textsuperscript{86} Likewise, Marr writes that in Vietnam, when young people commit a crime, they frequently ‘...blame their actions on long hours spent viewing pornographic videos from America and Thailand, or violent videos from Hong Kong, Taiwan and America. These explanations are generally accepted at face value when the interrogations and subsequent trials are reported in the press’(Marr, 1996:32).
This degradation of spiritual values under the socialist regime, which effectively cut off the country from Western influence for more than a decade, cannot be blamed upon the corrupting influence of the West. Western values and lifestyles have often been the focus of attack by those that decry the changing nature of the Vietnamese family in Australia, and the rhetoric of externalising of the causes of decay has worked at reinforcing a boundary that has always been unstable.

The expectation that one will have been transformed by the experience of separation from Vietnam is a common preconception amongst diasporic Vietnamese. After Mai's first trip back to her homeland, after twelve years of separation from her parents, she commented,

_I felt that the way that I presented myself to my family was so important. I had to show my parents that they had done the right thing in sending me off in a boat when I was ten years old. I had to prove to them that I was a success, that I had not wasted the opportunity. I felt that a lot depended on showing what I had made of my life away._

Huy also spoke of this self-conscious moment of evaluation,

_If I could show everyone what had changed in me, that things were good in Australia, then I could prove it to myself that I did the right thing._

These return trips of people to Vietnam, particularly when many relatives remain in the homeland, is frequently viewed as a moment in which the person returning is measured up for changes, for success, and for bringing back rewards to their country. Michael Jackson describes this story as one told everywhere,

...'... It is a story as old as humankind, because it is the story of Everyman. Sometimes it is cast as the story of a journey into a wild and distant place in search of riches, knowledge and enlightenment. A questing hero leaves home and hazards his life on discovering some magical property which will restore a lost reputation or fortune, grant immortality or great power, or bring the boon of civilisation to his people. But whatever the goal, be it spiritual illumination, scientific knowledge, or material wealth, the existential theme is always the same. We are told that everyone must sooner or later leave the secure confines of his homeland and strike out into the world, make his own way, assume control of his own destiny. Only when one has proven
oneself able to withstand the vicissitudes of the world can one return home and create a world... ‘(Jackson 1995:9-2).

The story of the journey of self-discovery, the setting out from home to return only after self-knowledge has been reached or ambition filled, is present in culturally diverse myths and legends and is also a common theme in Vietnamese folk tales and literature. Some overseas Vietnamese read these legends as holding clues to understanding their own situation, and advice for dealing with a different set of cultural values encountered on the journey. The following comment in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, is indicative of the kinds of connections that are made between the legendary wanderer and the refugee.

‘...The Vietnamese legend of Tu Thuc contained a useful message for Vietnamese refugees living in Australia. It displays typical features of mythical journeys to the spirit world, starting with the hero’s chance encounter with an immortal who strays into mundane reality. This makes it hard for him to settle down and many years later he sets off.....Having found a land of plenty, freedom will remain out of reach if refugees become bound to the daily concern for survival, efficiency and pace...’ (Do 1990:24-31).

This tale emphasises the dissatisfaction felt by the traveller with the material world, and with being out of the spirit world. This can be read as a message spurning materialism and a call for a renewed engagement in religious life. The theme of returning home to a changed world, to one where nothing is what it seems is also common in folktales. Vietnamese people both in Vietnam and abroad emphasise the evaluation of the self that occurs when the wanderer returns, echoing these tales of journeying and the eventual and inevitable confrontation with one’s past that results.

**Political movements**

Being Vietnamese in Vietnam is frequently described as being part of a nationalist, anti-colonial movement and this attitude is, of course, fuelled by State encouragement. Nationalism is presently being recreated in a changing political climate where almost the entire population is mobilising around transforming Vietnam into the next economic miracle of Asia. The discourse of post-colonialism
allows the Vietnamese subject to speak from an empowering position where they see themselves as the puppets of nobody. In Vietnam, it is because of the distinctly anti-imperialist stance of many Vietnamese that overseas Vietnamese are frequently equated with a lack of love and commitment for their country and as underdogs in a western country. One young Hanoi woman defined overseas Vietnamese to me in this way.

They leave because they are not committed to the freedom and independence of our country. We have historically fought off many enemies, we have been through very difficult times, but some Vietnamese people are not prepared to stay through those difficulties for the rewards of freedom at the end of the road. Those who leave are more interested in their economic status.

Although this attitude is common, there are many individuals who are, of course, extremely dissatisfied with the political system in Vietnam. Moves to resist the government within the country have been aided by overseas-Vietnamese especially in publishing materials considered to be subversive. In 1982, a prominent member of the Vietnamese community in Australia, Vo Dai Ton, a former lieutenant in the Vietnamese Army, was imprisoned by the Vietnamese Government for alleged guerilla activities in Vietnam (Bulletin 3 August 1982:24-6). That many in the diaspora support the protest movement against lack of political freedoms in Vietnam means that the voice of resistance is more powerful than if it were to come solely from those in the homeland, particularly as overseas-Vietnamese are in a position to apply pressure on governments abroad to affect internal policies in Vietnam. Even though there is a persistent cry against the excesses of communism in the diaspora, many dissidents within Vietnam wish to control the voice of protest themselves. Some members of the Writer’s Guild in Hanoi told me that by complaining against the Vietnamese Government the Viet kieu (overseas Vietnamese) were merely self-interested and only wanted to increase their own standing in the overseas community. The mythologising of the other is thus a mutual dialogue, images being created from both within and outside. The political nature of contemporary Vietnamese identities while being part of a global post-colonial discourse, is also, by definition, informed by the colonial past and the contemporary imperialism of economic power.
The Vietnamese language press in Australia frequently urges Vietnamese people in Australia to take actions in relation to the political situation in their homeland. In the 25 April, 1988 edition of Viet-Luan, a Sydney based paper, an article was published which was urging former Vietnamese refugees who trade with Communist Vietnam and return there as tourists to be treated as spies and punished by the Australian government. It also suggested that their assets be confiscated (p.12). In the Saigon News, 25 January, 1991 (pp.26-28), an article reported that a new resistance movement against the communist regime in Vietnam had been formed. This movement supported the Frontline Force for the Liberation of Vietnam (FFLV), both financially and with labour. The article noted that the leader of the FFLV had recently visited Vietnamese communities in Australia and that the organisation was a military one operating on the border regions of Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia. These articles endeavour to reinvigorate the declining interest on the part of most overseas Vietnamese in opposing the Vietnamese Communist state and to purposely set up a polar opposition between the overseas Vietnamese communities and the government of Vietnam. Moreover, this refuelling of opposition to Vietnam’s leadership is also a strategy to claim legitimacy as refugees from an undemocratic regime.

**Exchange with the colony**

The movement of money, commodities, written material, medicines and people between the overseas Vietnamese community and Vietnam is experiencing a rapid increase. These international networks of exchange operate at different levels. As well as the movement of money and commodities to Vietnam there is a movement out of Vietnam through continued departure of individuals and families to join their overseas relatives. I found that families with overseas Vietnamese relatives care very little about their family outside of Vietnam. The tremendously hard struggle to feed and clothe one’s family overshadows the importance of physically distant relatives. This indicates that the desire to maintain relationships with family is almost entirely originating in overseas communities and is very often not important in Vietnam. This is not to say that family is irrelevant but, rather, it is the family that is physically present that is of paramount importance. Many in Hanoi told me the same thing - their overseas relatives were living in rich countries therefore the
relatives in Vietnam do not need to care or be concerned about them. On occasions in Hanoi there is almost a feeling of disgust for overseas Vietnamese and people with or without relatives abroad talk of the boasting and bragging of the Viet kieu. All had stories to tell about Viet kieu ‘talking big’ and feel very uncomfortable in general about blatant displays of wealth. Most people who are given money by their overseas relatives resent being told by the donors how to spend the money, which is what frequently occurs.

So, overseas relatives have little influence on family life in Vietnam. The most important reason for the differing views of the construction of families is due to the effects of migration upon family life, for families both in Australia, and families separated by distance elsewhere in the diaspora or in Vietnam. Even though families might be fragmented because of migration, the Vietnamese system of kinship has become flexible in allowing people to invigorate certain relationships when they do not have the opportunity to have other ‘closer’ kin in proximity. During the late 1970s and the 1980s when many single Vietnamese were arriving on Australian shores, people would often seek out a possible relative they knew of in Australia, when often the exact relationship was difficult to determine. They did this because, as Huong told me,

Vietnamese people feel empty without family nearby, so often my friends would live with a person they hardly knew just because that person was their mother’s cousin’s relation.

As terms of address in Vietnamese are all kinship terms, it also became easy to ‘create’ kin. Frequently people would call others their ‘aunties’, ‘uncle’, or ‘cousin’, when there was no determinable kinship relationship but rather one wherein people fulfilled the role that the term implied. The constantly changing nature of Vietnamese families due to reunion, marriage and social mobility, means that some relationships are strengthened over time while others fade away in importance. This means that the notion of ‘close kin’ is infinitely flexible to the overseas Vietnamese. Within the families in Sydney I know, about 10% of net income is sent back home but frequently marriage partners do not inform their spouses of the exact amount of money involved for fear of antagonism. One of the most frequent sources of dispute in Vietnamese marriages surrounds sending money to relatives back in Vietnam, and who and who should not be beneficiaries.
Arguments often centre upon the relative closeness of particular kin and the degree to which a woman’s relatives or her husband’s are given preference.

Although the reckoning of kinship ties has altered dramatically among overseas Vietnamese, in Vietnam the influence of Confucianism is not only still present, but is presently undergoing some reinvigoration as a moral code. The emphasis that Confucianism places upon hierarchical family relations, filial piety, ancestor worship, and well-defined roles within the family has continued to play a role in the structuring of family ties. The hierarchical positions within the family determine that all relationships are at different levels, relating primarily to age. Depending on one’s placement within the kinship structure one may have an inferior or superior position relative to another person. In Hanoi many individuals commented to me that they have difficulty fitting rich overseas relatives into the scheme of their family relationships. The overseas members feel that they are in a higher social position but frequently have older relatives in Vietnam who feel uncomfortable freely giving that respect to a younger relative. There is a striking contrast between negative images of the aged in Australian society – images of illness, burden, isolation, and non-productivity – and the positive images of the aged in Vietnamese society – where the aged hold positions of power or are close to that power, where they are considered more adept at problem-solving, closer to the ancestors, and the upholders of family values. This contrast was commented upon by an elderly Vietnamese man when he told me,

*Vietnamese people worship the old people and our ancestors, while you in Australia worship the young.*

The Australian images of the aged together with the changed kinship relations mean that many tensions and misunderstandings arise when emigres return to Vietnam. But these conflicts are also a feature of the relations between the generations of Vietnamese families in Australia. In both cases the imprint of Western values is defined as the cause of the difficulties.

The impact of Confucianism in Vietnam not only places importance upon genealogy but also links individuals to the sites of ancestral graves. For overseas Vietnamese, this conception influences people’s sense of connection with their country, as the nhà (house, husband/wife, family) is embedded in a relationship with nước (the country, the countryside, the landscape) and the family, the village, community and
country are a coherent whole. The historic and genealogical links that each individual feels towards a particular 'place' in the country makes it difficult for most to think of leaving. Even urbanised Hanoi youth appear to frequently want to keep links with their village of origin which may be several generations in the past distant from them. This also explains the enormous sense of loss of country that overseas Vietnamese feel, it is not simply loss of a landscape but of a place of personal identity that is linked to the place of one's ancestors.

One of the ironies of the vision of Vietnam as having lost tradition is that many overseas Vietnamese return to Vietnam in the hope of partaking in that lost tradition. When returning at Tet many go to soothsayers and fortune tellers to hear predictions about the coming year. Some men return to Vietnam to have a marriage arranged for them. A recent survey by Daniel Goodkind (1994), a demographer who has worked in Vietnam, indicates that in 1945, almost all marriages in Vietnam were arranged, but the Vietnamese Government sought, in their words, 'to eliminate backward customs and bourgeois thoughts about marriage and the family', backward customs and bourgeois thoughts being arranged marriages and ritualistic behaviour surrounding marriage. Arranged marriages were seen as perpetuating the accumulation of inherited wealth and private property within certain privileged groups. The ritualistic behaviour such as horoscopal matching of marriage partners and a marriage date selected by a fortune teller were seen by the State as perpetuating superstition and religious ideology and therefore having the ability to reduce the power of the State. Goodkind's findings indicate that presently 8% of marriages in one representative area of the South and 5% of marriages in a region he studied in the North are arranged. However, I found that where arranged marriages occur in the overseas Vietnamese population in Australia, they almost all occur between Vietnamese-Australian men and Vietnamese women resident in Vietnam.
Discussion

It is clear that there are enormous contradictions in notions of tradition and modernity and in what is considered to be Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. What is clear, however, is that the contestation of identity cannot be separated from the history of the conflict that created such a massive displacement of people, and therefore cannot also be separated from western imperial cultural practices that impacted on Vietnam historically. In creating a Vietnamese identity in Australia, both diaspora and homeland engage in constructing commonality and difference. In the process of contesting identities of each other, both the Vietnamese in Australia and in Vietnam are often stereotyped by each other, which has led to the masking or negating of any clear continuities and similarities. Differential status is applied to the other by both parties. On both sides there has been a powerful desire to create difference and contrast in particular contexts. History and temporal transformation is invoked for articulating the nature of each other’s differently defined narratives of value. It thus appears that there is a rupture between conceptions of Vietnamese identity of Vietnamese in Australia and those in Vietnam. This rift fails to take account of the overlapping, crossing and incorporation of resistance discourse. For Vietnamese identities speak the words of resistance; resistance to a marginalisation that is present on both the local and global stages. The politics of Vietnamese identity is thus manifestly a challenge to the hegemonic practices of the powerful, although engaging in exchange and acknowledgement of that presence.
Conclusions

Distant homes, shifting boundaries

'To be alive is to participate in the social production of space, to shape and be shaped by a constantly evolving spatiality which constitutes and concretises social action and relationship' (Soja, 1985:90).

'...spatiality situates social life in an active arena where purposeful human agency jostles problematically with tendential social determinations to shape everyday activity, particularise social change, and etch into place the course of time and the making of history' (Soja, 1985:90).

By examining perceptions of both personal spaces and the urban landscape in western Sydney I was able to explore Soja's notion of 'a constantly evolving spatiality' in the lives of Vietnamese Australians. Through an attempt to consider the significance of different expressions of the concept of 'home', urban space was found to provide both possibilities and limitations (see also Thompson, 1994:35). Examining spatial and temporal meaning, which have together been called 'the existential centre of social life' (Friedland & Boden, 1994:1), is a central pathway along which one can examine political and social life within the diaspora. Following Heidegger (1962), this study is founded on the notion that social 'being' becomes apparent through its spatial and temporal character. Having a sense of place is a vigorous and entangled process in the ongoing negotiations over Vietnamese migrant identities. It is linked also to the way that Vietnamese communities are represented to the mainstream. Social hierarchies are encoded in parallel with the 'placement' of Vietnamese within physical and social worlds in which they interact with others.

Recent scholarship in urban planning has overwhelming argued that profound changes in urban landscapes have been impacted upon by relations in the wider social environment, that 'Cities, like bodies, are sites of symbolic, textual and political interpretation and struggle' (Larbarestier, 1994:193). By examining the constant reformulations of social and physical landscapes, it is possible to provide insight into the way in which Vietnamese-Australians create and represent their place in Australia, and how they live in, and imagine space. The transformation in
the terrain of space that has occurred in our cities through migration has highlighted the complexity of the organisation and nature of space and posed challenges to established views of spatial praxis. This project traced how engagements in space affect the ways that Vietnamese people in Australia live in and experience the world.

This thesis has also followed the ways in which a displaced people experience belonging within the here and now while dwelling also in another place and time. Although people may not continue to directly experience Vietnam, the past may be experientially vivid and continue to constitute their present lifeworld. By tracing the psychosocial space of Vietnamese Australians, I have revealed the way in which the potency of the world that has been left is experienced in legends, in memory, and in the everyday. I have also attempted to explore the hidden dimensions of marginality through a study of the spatial politics of difference. The identities of Vietnamese people are infused with new meanings as people's lives undergo transformation within the changing environmental and cultural worlds of Australia. Here, they are impacted upon by the expectations and responses of mainstream society, in whose history they can never completely participate. Markers of Vietnamese cultural difference have come to be viewed as border guards, preventing total incorporation into the wider society. It is important, however, to view these signs as a construction of the wider society as much as the Vietnamese themselves and to see them as both constraining and liberating.

I have examined the location of Vietnamese people within the overarching historical and political contexts of migration, and revealed the way in which ethnic identity is expressed through an 'imagined community'. This identity, which is a process of continually unfolding meaning, is also linked to the actions of the state that become incorporated into the constructions of ethnicity and sustained by multicultural policy. Both bureaucratic action and communities themselves are involved in this identity formation that is a reification process in which certain cultural features have become emblematic of the whole. I have indicated that such ethnic identification can be more easily examined as a myriad of intersecting and mutable identifications informed by the plurality of relationships in which individuals interact. This study began with the notion that identity is spatially encoded, and that the modes of defining the self are physically and metaphorically incorporated in space. The ongoing relationship with Vietnam connects people through time and space with a mythologised place that lies within the landscape of memory. The degrees of separation from the symbolic landscape of Vietnam are invoked in the reconstruction of identity that occurs after migration. In the following discussion I
would like to draw attention to the way in which a thematic of space ties together many of the threads of diaspora existence.

The spatial configuration of Vietnamese-Australian identities has been explored in several different domains. I set out by providing a background to the displacement process through a historical account of the transformations in Vietnamese national identity, and the events that led to mass migration out of the country. I have also traced the history of Vietnamese migration to Australia, Australia's changing relationships to migrants through policies on immigration and multiculturalism, and the different positionings of Vietnamese in Australia socially and economically. Through the personal accounts of these processes by Vietnamese people, I detailed the response to the arrival of Vietnamese people by Australian society, and the changes within the Vietnamese communities over the last twenty years. These historical and social processes indicated the embedded and contingent nature of migrant experience. I also examined the construction of spatially-based marginalisation within Australian suburbs starting from the sense of having different bodies and leading through the houses and homes of Vietnamese-Australians to the use of public spaces. Homes could be the site of autonomy as well as a safety and refuge, but could also be the location of conflict.

By examining memory as well as the ongoing relationship that Vietnamese people have with their homeland I also explored the geopolitical landscape that invests the lives of Vietnamese-Australians with the past, in another time and space. The creation of boundaries has occurred on several sides of Vietnamese identities that are both threatened and threatening. The borderlands are formed within the broader Australian community as well as in relation to an imaginary past and the present homeland. The creativity of diasporas under constant and changing circumstances is accentuated by the will to create instability along the borders of both sides of a cultural divide, borders which attempt to reduce the manifold nature of experience to something fixed and immutable. The assertion of Vietnamese people living in Australia to a historical genealogy is a claim to a connection to another part of the world. The contemporary global burgeoning of identity politics along with the politics of multiculturalism in Australia have played a role in the continuing engagement with, and often enhancement of, the allegiances that Vietnamese people have with their homeland. These allegiances continue to shape identities which become embedded in narratives of another place and time.

For all migrants the past is a mythic place. I have shown how all time periods – the past, present and the future – can be idealised and viewed as utopian, to satisfy
different needs at different times. I do not suggest that the identities of Vietnamese-Australians are always struggling with an eternally present past life, as very often the past is completely forgotten and a different sense of self is experienced. Rather, the self is always fragmented, and a sense of the past is sometimes lost, sometimes held dear, and at other times just another fragment in the experience of the self. However, the past can often have profound impact upon the everyday lives of people, and I have attempted to capture that experience of the past in the narratives of Vietnamese people. How this link to another place and time relates to their knowledge of themselves, to their subjectivity, was found to be an extension of the interrelationships they had with others. The continuing re-constructions of authenticity and the ensuing struggles over identity are a vastly complex web of representations. However, the ideological environment in which these contests are framed, links discourses on Vietnamese identity historically to the construction of national identity and to notions of ethnic purity. Images of Vietnamese identity must also be viewed as arising from the non-Vietnamese discourses on the American Vietnam War, migrants, Asians, and the transformations in Australian urban life. At heart is the locus of power relations not only in Vietnamese communities, but also in the broader Australian community as well as in the global arena. It is to these intersubjective relations that I turned in addressing the question of the contested nature of Vietnamese identity. The construction of tradition and authenticity, and the politics of ethnicity among the Vietnamese in Australia has parallels with the experience of other migrant groups and indigenous peoples as well as within post-colonial nation building.

These clamourings to be heard run counter to representations of Vietnamese submission and resignation, and evoke other experiences of resistance such as mobilisation against a communist regime. Here, opposition to the authority and institutions of the state and the institutions of the state in Vietnam has sometimes marked Vietnamese people’s response to the organs of the state in Australia. In the Vietnamese narratives of displacement, by revealing the patterns by which new identities are jostled for, I illustrated both the processes and the politics involved in the creation and maintenance of an ‘authentic’ tradition within the experience of migrancy. At this time, twenty years since the beginnings of a Vietnamese community within Australia, when there is an intense renegotiation of cultural meanings between men and women, between parents and children, and between those of different ethnic backgrounds, the nature of Vietnamese identity is itself representative of shifting power relations. Here, elements abstracted from the past are woven into an ethnic identity that is the inventive dimension of the experience of displacement.
The different landscapes and social worlds that Vietnamese people have found themselves in cannot be viewed as a stage upon which they perform their culturally acquired activities. Rather, the social and physical surrounds are themselves cultural products and engage with the sociality of actors moving within changing geographies. In this thesis I traced the way in which Vietnamese people experience differing realms of space within Australian society. Beginning from the body and moving through domestic spaces out to urban spaces and beyond to the spaces of memory and imagination, I revealed the way in which spatial meaning is imprecated throughout the migrant experience. The bodies of migrants, for example, are products of cultural and historical encounters and the ways that bodies move in space are constituted by these encounters. At the same time bodies generate cultural meanings and constitute social relations.

While not suggesting that space is the sole route through which one can understand migrant experience, I have here attempted to render space a primary route through which one can demonstrate a migrant's relationship to both the past and the new world they find themselves in. In order to demonstrate this, I employed the notion that space is '...fundamental in any exercise of power' (Foucault, 1984:252). Foucault, among other theorists, makes it clear that space is an element in all forms of social relation and expression. I have here attempted to bring spatial practice into a central focus, a type of analysis that has often been disregarded in diaspora studies. Increasing global urbanisation has come to mean that social relations cannot be separated from their local and regional arenas. I have, in this thesis, indicated the way in which an anthropology within cities must include an analysis of the interrelations between the social realm and the landscape and urban forms.

This thesis has also demonstrated that space is the site for transformation in relations both within and outside the Vietnamese migrant family. Elizabeth Grosz (1993) has pointed out that marginalised positions in society may be both crippling and empowering, creating both a mode of domination and strategies of resistance. She writes, ‘All social marginals, all exiles, are splayed between these two poles or extremes – one a tendency towards death, the other a positive movement towards self-production, critical resistance and transformative struggle’ (ibid:57). This ‘transformative struggle’ is evidenced through spatial practice where there is a contestation over the ownership and control of different spaces, and the practices that are permitted to occur within different spaces. Trangressions into public spaces were identified as moments in which control over space was in conflict. The presence of Vietnamese people in the spaces of the dominant was thus an idiom of
struggle and protest. Powerlessness is felt, partly because of the lack of control over the world outside the family and the community. As Michael Jackson has noted, ‘Experientially, home was a matter of being-at-home-in-the-world. It connoted a sense of existential control and connectedness – the way we feel when what we say or do seems to matter, and there is a balanced reciprocity between the world beyond us and the world within which we move’ (Jackson, 1995:154). That is, the lack of symmetry between the known experience and the world outside creates for those who have left their homeland a sense of lack of control over the space outside. The boundary between the known and the space beyond may be the family, the community, the suburb, or a corporeal mode of being that gives comfort and security. It is also at those boundaries where change is most likely to occur, where resistance and cultural mobilisation will manifest themselves, and where creative forms of experience will eclipse stereotypes.

Identity is constantly shifting, there is an interplay across national boundaries as identity is influenced by the past and contemporary world situation. My findings indicate that the changing locations of Vietnamese people in the Australian political and geographical landscape are a manifestation of a political will. I attempted to grasp the webs of belonging and separation among Vietnamese refugees in spatial terms, and to show how these are part of the ongoing negotiations over identity and connection to homeland. By casting a view over history, international politics, urban planning, and the life of the ‘city’ together with the experiences of Vietnamese people, in their lives both in Vietnam and in Australia, it was shown how resistant these experiences are to marginalisation. By examining the social production of place and the symbolic space of home, it is clear that struggles over the different spaces of people’s lives are intertwined with the political determination of diaspora people who continually resonate with their past. Boundaries are marked and then transgressed from all sides of the different cultural spaces of our cities. For those who have left their homeland behind, places no longer provide an unambiguous and certain grounding for their identity. Though that ‘home’ may be tangibly inaccessible and become an abstraction, it nevertheless continues to penetrate many dimensions of the lives of diaspora peoples.
APPENDIX

A demographic and socio-economic profile of Australian Vietnamese (from the 1991 census)

The purpose of this appendix is to provide socio-economic and demographic information on Vietnam-born people who are settled in Australia. I have analysed data available from the 1991 census in order to provide a background to the relationship of Vietnamese to mainstream Australian society that I have outlined in the thesis. The major problem in relying heavily on census data is that it does not accurately convey the lived experience of people, having a tendency to construct a view that is static, when there is movement, structured where there is fluidity. Other reasons for not finding census data an accurate reflection of reality are: individuals being missed by the census, non-response to some questions, errors in completing or processing the forms, poor questions and inaccuracies in collecting the data, a lack of general survey material to back up the findings. Although there are these problems in using data from the census, I have found the information useful in placing my fieldwork in the wider perspective of an examination of the structural position of Vietnamese people in Australia. The demographic data has also been helpful in analysing social trends in the diaspora communities.

From 1975 onward Australia accepted increasing numbers of refugees fleeing the communist regime in the re-unified Vietnam. Table 1 lists the number of Vietnam-born settler arrivals, and indicates that in the financial year 1975-1976, Australia accepted 539 Vietnamese refugees. The numbers rapidly increased to a peak of 12,915 in 1979-1980. Although since 1980 there have been fewer refugees coming from Vietnam, the number of Vietnamese joining family members under family migration programs has steadily increased. In 1990-1991 the total number of Vietnamese arriving in Australia to settle was 13,248, its highest level to date. The 1991 census indicates that the total number of the Vietnam-born population was 121,813 an increase from 82,721 in 1986. In 1991 there were 25,151 in the second generation, that is, Australian-born people who have one or both parents born in Vietnam (Community Profiles, 1994:38).
Table 1

Vietnam-born settler arrivals
Financial Years 1975-76 to 1992-93

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial year</th>
<th>Settlers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975-76</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-77</td>
<td>951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977-78</td>
<td>5,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978-79</td>
<td>10,828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979-80</td>
<td>12,915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-81</td>
<td>12,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-82</td>
<td>11,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-83</td>
<td>8,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-84</td>
<td>9,510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984-85</td>
<td>8,487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>7,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-87</td>
<td>6,628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>5,981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>7,961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-90</td>
<td>11,156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>13,248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-92</td>
<td>9,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-93</td>
<td>5,651</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


By exploring the social effects of the trends that are exhibited in the following demographic and socio-economic data, a background to the particular experiences, preoccupations, and concerns of the Vietnam-born population in Australia will become clearer. The following examination of the 1991 census data will, where relevant, make reference to the previous census of 1986 in order to elucidate some of the changes that have taken place since that time. Comparison will also be made between the information available for Vietnam-born persons and the second generation (the Australian-born children of one or both Vietnam-born parents). Unless otherwise stated, the 1986 census data and the 1991 census data on the second-generation has been obtained from the publications titled Community Profiles; Viet Nam Born (1990 and 1994) of the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research in Canberra.
I. Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Age and Gender

Table 2a indicates the distribution of different age-groups for the Vietnam-born population in Australia. One of the demographic changes that has taken place since the 1986 census is the dramatic rise in numbers of people over 55 years of age due to family reunion. In the over 65 years age-group there has been the most significant rise, an increase of 169.5% since 1986. The outcome of family reunion programs has been that there is now a more even distribution of age-groups, whereas prior to 1986 the Vietnam-born population was relatively youthful. Due to the recency of migration, 97.4% of the second generation were under 15 years of age (Table 2b).

The most striking aspect of the age distribution of the Vietnam-born is the difference between the numbers of Vietnam-born males and females in the age-groups 15-35. The number of men considerably outweighs the number of women in this age-group. Table 2a shows the percentage distribution but does not adequately indicate the numerical difference because of the difference in the total number of males and females (63,830 males compared with 58,203 females). Table 2c indicates that the most marked difference in numbers of males and females occurs in the age-group 15-34, which encompasses the ages at which most people seek to find marriage partners. In the age-group 25-29, 22% of Vietnam-born men in the age-group 25-29 will have been unable to find Vietnam-born marriage partners in the same age-group. It is fairly uncommon for the Vietnam-born in Australia to marry non-Vietnam born persons. Statistics on marriage from 1991 to 1993 reveal that 17% of Vietnamese women marry non-Vietnamese compared with 21% of Vietnamese men (Goodkind, 1994). Most of these ‘out-marriages’, for both men and women, are to other Asia-born people, usually Chinese. This may reflect that over 30% of the Vietnam-born population in Australia have Chinese ancestry, many of these maintaining a sense of Chinese identity and still speaking their regional Chinese dialect. The result is that the assumed ‘out-marriages’ of the Vietnam-born may well be marriages between Chinese-speaking persons and can therefore still be classified as marriages within the same ethnic grouping.

When there is a disproportion of sexes in the age-group when most people marry, numerous social problems may arise. There has been an increasing number of Vietnam-born Australian men returning to Vietnam to find marriage partners. Vietnam
has the inverse problem that there is a disproportionately large number of Vietnamese women in the usual marrying age-group. However, as will be shown later, there is a high unemployment rate for the Vietnam-born population. My own fieldwork experiences indicate that unemployment reduces the marriageability of young men but does not do so for women. An unfortunate repercussion of this is that unmarried men often find less motivation for seeking employment than do their married counterparts who feel compelled to contribute substantially to the financial support of their families. Although there has been some improvement in the imbalance between men and women since the 1986 census due to family reunion, many men still remain unmarried into their forties. There is a gradual change in household structure of the Vietnam-born from households consisting of extended families to nuclear family households. Where unmarried men for the most part presently remain part of a larger household, this may not necessarily be the case in the future. However, the indications of a slow but consistent improvement in the sex ratio means that the more severe social problems associated with the alienation and isolation of unmarried Vietnam-born men (such as alcohol dependence, drug abuse, and gambling) could be significantly reduced.
### Table 2a
Percentage* Distribution of Age by Gender – 1991 Census:
Total Vietnam-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group (Years)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-12</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Number       63830  58203
Median Age         29.3   30.5
Sex Ratio**        109.7
Dependency Ratio*** 0.20


* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.
** The sex ratio is the number of males per 100 females.
*** The dependency ratio is the proportion of the population that is economically inactive (less than 15 years old, and 65 years of age and over) to the economically active population (between 15 and 64 years of age).

### Table 2b
Percentage* Distribution of Age by Gender – 1991 Census:
The Second Generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group (Years)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Number       13,000  12,151

### Table 2c

**Distribution of Age by Gender – 1991 Census:**
**Total Vietnam-Born**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group (Years)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-12</td>
<td>4985</td>
<td>4516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>2922</td>
<td>2765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>7647</td>
<td>6971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>8101</td>
<td>6490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>8970</td>
<td>7026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>10023</td>
<td>8514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>7576</td>
<td>7610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>4398</td>
<td>4328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>4256</td>
<td>4066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>2784</td>
<td>3204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>1694</td>
<td>2275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Marital Status**

Table 3 indicates the marital status of the Vietnam-born population and reflects the sex ratio imbalance as detailed above. 46.1% of men over 15 years of age are unmarried compared to 35% of women. When the overall numbers of males and females are taken into account, the differences appear even more pronounced as there are markedly more males than females in the marriageable age-groups. 25,476 males over 15 years old are unmarried compared with 17,665 females. This also suggests that many Vietnam-born men remain unmarried throughout their life. It is not therefore surprising that when Vietnam-born individuals marry non-Vietnamese people it is primarily men who do so.

The figures on marital status also indicate the very low levels of separation and divorce within the Vietnam-born population compared with the general Australian population. Even though this is indeed the case, the author’s research in Sydney indicates that these figures may represent under-reporting of individuals who are separated but not divorced. It appears that divorce and separation are not viewed favourably by most Vietnamese people. If a couple are experiencing marriage difficulties, relatives may arrange a separation whereby one partner goes to live in another city or another
location within the same city on the pretext of employment, so that the couple may be perceived to be still married in the eyes of the community. On these occasions the couple may not declare to the rest of the community that they are separated.

Another feature of Table 3 is the large number of widowed women. There are 2,776 widowed Vietnam-born women compared with 498 widowed men. This is indicative of the large number of Vietnamese women who were widowed during the American War in Vietnam.

Table 3

Percentage* Distribution of Marital Status of Persons Aged 15 or More Years Old by Gender - 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated but not Divorced</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Number                 | 55383 | 50470


* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.

II. Year of Arrival

Table 4 indicates that the mean year of arrival for both men and women was 1984. However, the figures do not show the changes in the composition of migrants from Vietnam over the years. Prior to 1975 most of the Vietnam-born population in Australia were students who came to Australia either as recipients of the Colombo Plan scholarships or as private students. The so-called 'first-wave' of Vietnamese migrants were mostly those associated with the South Vietnamese Government or the South Vietnamese Army and left soon after 1975. The 'second-wave' flowed out of the country after 1979 and consisted primarily of those of Chinese ancestry. Most people who fled the country in boats spent one or more years in refugee camps in Asia before being granted refugee-status to settle in Australia. Thus if an individual arrived in 1984 they are most likely to have left Vietnam in 1982 or 1983. We can also identify a 'third wave' of migrants from Vietnam. These arrived after 1985 and consist
mostly of family members of Vietnam-born Australian residents who gained entry under the family reunion program. Examined in total these figures indicate that the greatest number of Vietnam-born individuals arrived in the fifteen year period 1977-1992 with a small percentage of their overall number arriving before and after that time (see Table 1). Although there has been a chain effect of family reunion the numbers have fallen considerably since 1992. The Vietnam-born population is thus unusual compared with most other migrant groups for having arrived in large numbers over a short time period.

### Table 4

**Percentage* Distribution of Year of Arrival in Australia by Gender - 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Arrival in Australia</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to 1971</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-1975</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-1980</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-1985</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-1987</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-1989</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1991</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number</strong></td>
<td>63830</td>
<td>58203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median</strong></td>
<td>1984.0</td>
<td>1984.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.

### III. Spatial Distribution

The spatial distribution of the Vietnam-born population in Australia has been studied extensively by Coughlan (1989b and 1990) and Viviani, Coughlan, and Rowland, (1993). Their work has indicated that the settlement patterns of the Vietnam-born are highly dynamic. Cabramatta, which lies within the local government area of Fairfield in western Sydney, has the highest percentage of Vietnam-born individuals. Table 5 indicates the spatial distribution of each Australian state. Together New South Wales and Victoria account for 76.6% of Vietnam-born people. Queensland(7.1%), South Australia(7.6%) and Western Australia(6.7%) have similar numbers of Vietnamese people, the Australian Capital Territory has somewhat less (1.6%) and the Northern Territory(0.3%) and Tasmania(0.2%) have comparatively few Vietnamese people.
Table 5
Percentage* Spatial Distribution – 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region of Birth</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>VIC</th>
<th>QLD</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>WA</th>
<th>TAS</th>
<th>NT</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Asia</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>121729</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.

As would be expected, by far the greatest number of Vietnam-born people live in the urban centres of Sydney and Melbourne. Table 6 lists the ten Local Government Areas (LGAs) with the greatest number of Vietnam-born people. Fairfield, which encompasses Cabramatta, has by far the greatest number; 15.9% of the total Vietnam-born population in Australia. The top ten locations are all in Sydney or Melbourne. However, if one examines the percentage of the overall population of each area that are Vietnamese, there is an interesting finding; in the Brisbane locality of Darra-Summer, Vietnamese people make up 17% of the population of the area, whereas in Fairfield, Vietnamese people make up 12% of the entire population. This is probably due to the different urban structures and patterns of dispersal of Vietnamese people in Brisbane compared with those in Sydney and Melbourne. Darra-Summer in Brisbane does not have as high a general population density as do Fairfield (NSW), Marrickville (NSW) and Springvale City (VIC). The most popular locations for the Vietnam-born in Sydney and Melbourne are constituted by many other recently-arrived migrant groups in relatively high concentrations, and this has the effect of lowering the overall percentage of Vietnamese in these areas.
Table 6

Local Government Areas (LGA) with the Greatest Number of Total Vietnam-Born People and Their Proportion of the Birthplace Group's Total Population in Australia – 1991 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Government Area (State/Territory)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Proportion of the Birthplace Group’s Total Australian Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fairfield City (NSW)</td>
<td>19324</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Springvale City (VIC)</td>
<td>6523</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankstown City (NSW)</td>
<td>6231</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine City (VIC)</td>
<td>5917</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footscray City [VIC]</td>
<td>4950</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canterbury Municipality (NSW)</td>
<td>4657</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marrickville Municipality (NSW)</td>
<td>3826</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne City (VIC)</td>
<td>3492</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auburn Municipality (NSW)</td>
<td>3215</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond City [VIC]</td>
<td>2353</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


IV. Family Type

Table 7 lists the distribution of family types. Although 67.7% of families consist of two parents with dependent children there are a high number of families consisting of one parent with dependent children; 15.5% of all families. Considering the low level of divorce among Vietnam-born people, this is a very high level of single-parent families (4,699 in number). This figure is much greater than the combined number of widowed women who are still young enough to have dependent children, and divorced and separated women indicated in Table 2. It is almost always the case that the children of divorced and separated Vietnamese parents remain with the mother. As mentioned earlier, there are probably higher rates of separation and divorce than are reported on the census due to a generally negative perception of divorce and separation within the Vietnamese community. There is a small but increasing number of women who are unmarried mothers which would also form part of the figure for single-parent families. However, with all the types of single parent families taken into account it is highly likely that the high number of single parent families (15.5% of all families) represents over-reporting of single parenthood on the census forms. The author’s research indicates that the reason for this is probably that there are individuals who claim they are separated in order to receive an increase in their welfare payments.
There is a median number of 0.59 people aged 65 and over in each household which is a rather high figure when compared with the general Australian population. This indicates that Vietnamese people over 65 years old usually live with younger people, usually one of their children or other relatives. It appears that most Vietnam-born persons over 65 have joined younger family members through the family reunion program, frequently have little English, and are themselves dependent on their younger relatives for material and emotional support. A detailed study of the experiences of the Vietnam-born elderly has been recently undertaken by Thomas and Balnaves (1993) which indicates that family reunion can have both positive and negative social consequences.

Table 7

Percentage* Distribution of Family Type – 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Type</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Parent with Dependent Children</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Parent without Dependent Children</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Parents with Dependent Children</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Parents without Dependent Children</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Number of Dependent Offspring in Family</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Number of People Aged 65+ in Household</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>30319</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*
Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.

V. Linguistic Characteristics

English Language Proficiency

Levels of English language proficiency are listed in Table 8. 55.7% of Vietnam-born males report speaking English well or very well compared with 43.1% of females. The figures also indicate that there are a large number of Vietnam-born people who do not speak English well; 36% of men and 40.1% of women. There are also a large number of individuals who do not speak English at all; 5.6% of men and 14.2% of women. The disparity in English proficiency between men and women is indicative of the large number of women who are at home with children, the recent rise in the number of aged women due to family reunion, and the higher levels of female
unemployment. The generally low levels of English proficiency are primarily the result of the recency of migration, as English proficiency is directly related to length of residence in Australia. However, high unemployment levels can also prevent the attainment of adequate English because this situation prevents people improving their English in a work environment. There has been little improvement in these figures since the last census of 1986 due to the large intake of Vietnamese migrants from 1989-1992. However, as the average length of residence increases, levels of English proficiency will accelerate rapidly.

**Table 8**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Proficiency</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaks Only English</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Proficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Well or Well</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Well</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not At All</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>55301</td>
<td>50338</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.

**Language and Ethnicity**

The 1986 census revealed that 34.1% of the Vietnam-born listed Chinese as their ancestry. As the 1991 census did not include a question on ancestry, the only indication of ancestry can be found in the figures for the distribution of the principal languages spoken at home. Table 9 indicates that those speaking Chinese languages account for about 22% of the overall Vietnam-born population, a reduction from the 1986 figure of 28.8% speaking Chinese languages at home. The increase in the percentage of those speaking Vietnamese at home from 69.7% in 1986 to 74% in 1991 and the reduction in percentages speaking Chinese is primarily due to a disproportional
increase in migration of ethnic Vietnamese since 1986. Most Vietnam-born people of Chinese ancestry speak Vietnamese fluently and many do not speak Chinese at all due to the policy of the socialist government in Vietnam of banning Chinese schools. The result has been that in marriages between Vietnam-born ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese is the language most likely to be spoken at home. Due to intermarriage between the two groups, Vietnamese is likely to be increasingly privileged in the homes of the Vietnam-born of Chinese ancestry. The low percentages of Vietnam-born persons marrying non-Asians is reflected in the figure of 2.1% of the total Vietnam-born population who speak only English at home.

Among the second generation (those Australian-born persons with one or both parents born in Vietnam), 8.6% indicated that they spoke English only at home in 1991, 56.6% spoke Vietnamese, 24.1% listed a Chinese language, and 10.7% reported other languages.

Table 9

Percentage* Distribution of Principal Language Spoken at Home (in Addition to English, if English is Spoken at Home) of Persons Aged 5 Years Old and Over by Gender - 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Spoken at Home</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only English</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (As Stated)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (Not Included Elsewhere)</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>72.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>63689</td>
<td>58040</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.
VI. Education

The education levels of the Vietnam-born population are listed in Table 10. There are two important features of this table. The first is that 20.3% of Vietnam-born people have educational and occupational qualifications, a low figure when compared with the general Australian population, 38.8% of whom have such educational levels. Considering the relatively recent mean year of arrival, the low tertiary education levels of the Vietnam-born are not unexpected. The second feature of Table 10 is the extremely low percentage of unskilled Vietnamese people. These two elements together reflect the same set of cultural values. Vietnamese people tend to highly value university education and show great respect for teachers and university educated people. Because of this, one of the most valuable attributes of Vietnamese people in terms of their status, is considered to be a high level of educational attainment. However, low levels of English proficiency together with the trauma associated with family dislocation and a different cultural climate have worked against the attainment of high levels of education. This problem is compounded by the low value that the Vietnam-born place upon qualifications that do not require a university education. Children of Vietnam-born parents are often strongly encouraged to attend university and are frequently dissuaded from achieving basic skilled vocational qualifications. This is reflected in the extremely high level of Vietnam-born population with no skills; 79.3% of men and 82.4% of women. To some degree this represents the experiences of the Vietnam-born in their country of origin. Vietnam, as with other Asian countries, has not, until recently, had a system of formal education for many low level skilled vocations.

As 97.4% of Australian-born persons with one or both parents born in Vietnam (the second generation) are under 15 years of age, there is only a small number who have post-secondary qualifications. From the figures available it appears that, following the pattern of their parents, few of the second generation have obtained skilled or basic vocational qualifications. However, as would be expected, there is a higher rate of post-secondary qualifications among the second generation; 9% compared with 6.8% for their Vietnam-born parents (Table 2b). This is still below that of the total Australian population, 12.8% of whom have post-secondary qualifications.
Table 10a

**Percentage* Distribution of Level of Qualifications and Median Age Left School of Persons Aged 15 Years Old and Over by Gender - 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Qualifications</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Degree</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Diploma</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Diploma</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Vocational</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Vocational</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Qualifications</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total Number                  | 55429| 50484  |
| Median Age Left School (Years Old) | 18.6 | 18.1   |


*Percentages in the upper portion of this table may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.*
Table 10b
Percentage* Distribution of Level of Qualifications and Median Age Left School of Persons Aged 15 Years Old and Over by Gender – 1991 Census: Total – The Second Generation (a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Qualifications</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Degree</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Diploma</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Diploma</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Vocational</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Vocational</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (b)</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Qualified</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Qualifications (c)</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Number                  | 310  | 249    |

* Percentages in the upper portion of this table may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.
(a.) Defined as Australian-born who have one or both parents born in Vietnam
(b.) Comprises level of attainment inadequately described and level of attainment not stated
(c.) Includes persons still at school and not stated

VII. Labour Force Characteristics

Labour Force Status

Table 11 indicates the Labour Force Status of Vietnam-born people over the age of 15. The figures indicate that there is a serious problem of unemployment in the Vietnam-born population, the problem being more severe for women. Vietnam-born males have an unemployment rate of 36.1% and women have an unemployment rate of 44.9%. The median year of arrival for the unemployed is 1985 for both women and men suggesting that it is not only recent arrivals from Vietnam who have had trouble finding employment.

Of those who are employed 83.7% of men are wage or salary earners compared with 77.3% of women. 14% of Vietnam-born women are self-employed compared with
9.7% of men. The reason that women are more likely than men to be self-employed is that many women work from home; cooking, sewing, or cleaning, usually for small businesses. The figures below mask the informal networks of employment that operate within the Vietnamese community, where many work unofficially for friends or family, usually without declaring their activities or earnings.

The many studies of unemployment among the Indochinese in Australia indicate that a combination of factors has led to continuing high unemployment levels, the most important of which is the relatively short period of residence in Australia (Viviani, Coughlan, and Rowland, 1993; Jones and McAllister, 1991; Foster, Marshall, and Williams, 1991). Features of unemployment among Vietnamese also include high unemployment levels among women which is in part due to the overall decline in clothing and textile manufacturing, a sector which in the past employed significant numbers of Vietnam-born women. There is also a pattern of high unemployment among youth and those over 45 years of age, a phenomenon that occurs in the general Australian population, but that is particularly striking among the Vietnamese (Viviani, Coughlan and Rowland, 1993). A lack of qualifications has compounded the unemployment problem at a time when there has been a shedding of jobs in manufacturing, an area that has traditionally employed unskilled migrants.
Table 11


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour Force Status and Status of Worker</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour Force Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in Labour Force</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>55383</td>
<td>50470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Force Participation Rate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Year of Arrival in Australia of those Unemployed (Years)</td>
<td>1985.4</td>
<td>1985.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage/Salary Earner</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Employed</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid Helper</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>25915</td>
<td>15937</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.

**Occupations**

Table 12 indicates the occupations of Vietnam-born people. The most common occupations for men are labourer (23%), plant and machine operator (21.6%), and tradesperson (18.2%). However, considering the relatively short period of time resident in Australia, a high percentage of Vietnamese men are professionals (8.4%) or are managers or administrators (4.8%). The most common occupations for women are labourer (20.3%), plant and machine operator (19.7%), clerk (14.3%) and professional service or sales (12.3%). A comparatively high percentage of Vietnamese women also are professional (6.5%) or managers or administrators (3.9%). This
distribution of occupation reflects the educational attainments of the Vietnam-born population.

Table 12

Percentage* Distribution of Occupation and Median Hours Worked per Week by Gender - 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager/Administrator</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para Professional</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradesperson</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Service and Sales</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant and Machine Operator</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourer</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequately Described</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Number 26317 16025
Median Hours Worked per Week 39.6 38.5

* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.

Industry of Employment

Table 13 shows the distribution of industry of employment of the Vietnam-born population and reveals that 44.7% of males and 38.1% of women work in the manufacturing industry. As labour markets have been under a process of transformation over the last decade we have seen a huge reduction in available jobs in manufacturing. This has meant that many recent Vietnam-born arrivals who are unskilled find it extremely difficult to find employment. Even so, the figure of 42.8% for the Vietnam-born who participate in the manufacturing industry is very much higher than the 13.1% figure for the general Australian population (Community Profiles, 1994:24). The next most common industry of employment for Vietnam-born men and women is in the Wholesale and Retail Trade industry with 13.3% of men and 14.9% of women working in this area. Although more than half Vietnam-born women and men work in either Manufacturing or Wholesale and Retail Trade some other
interesting figures emerge from this table. Firstly, 8.6% of women work in Community Services indicating the growing number of women who are working for their community as social workers, health workers, translators or as providers of information or other services to both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese members of the community. Almost 5% of the total Vietnam-born population are employed in the communications industry. Most of these work for Australia Post, which has become a popular area of employment for Vietnamese people. The perception of employment in Australia Post within the Vietnamese community is that it provides secure employment for skilled individuals, many of whom have university qualifications in Vietnam but not in Australia.

Since 1986, there has been considerable social differentiation within the Vietnam-born population in relation to employment. While there has been a movement out of manufacturing and other sectors that have traditionally provided employment for unskilled workers, there has been a movement by skilled and educated workers into the public sectors, business, and community services.

Table 13

Percentage* Distribution of Industry of Employment by Gender – 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, Gas and Water</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale and Retail Trade</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport and Storage</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial, Property and Business Services</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration and Defence</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Service</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational and Personal Services</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Classifiable</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>26119</td>
<td>16202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.
VIII. Income and Housing

Income

Table 14 shows the distribution of income among the Vietnam-born population. Overall Vietnamese people have low income levels. The large number of men (25.1%) and women (24.9%) whose income is between $5,001 and $8,000 are probably welfare recipients. For Vietnam-born men, 35.3% have an income of between $12,000 and $25,000. The greater proportion of women whose income falls below $12,000 is probably indicative of the labour many women perform from their homes such as sewing or cooking. That 13.5% of women did not state their income probably also represents the informal labour network in which many women participate. Although there is probably considerable under-reporting of income due to informal income-generating activities, more accurate figures would still represent very low levels of income among the Vietnam-born. Even though material welfare generally has not been lacking in the Vietnamese community, considerable nutritional, educational, economic and social disadvantage of children may be the result of low income levels of parents in the future (Krupinski & Burrows, 1986; Borthwick, 1987; Taylor and MacDonald, 1992). In order to avert these problems, the challenge to increase employment opportunities for unskilled Vietnamese as well as providing sufficient social security benefits for low-income families, must be directly faced.
Table 14


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-3000</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3001-5000</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5001-8000</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8001-12000</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12001-16000</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16001-20000</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20001-25000</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25001-30000</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30001-35000</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35001-40000</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40001-50000</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50001-60000</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60001-70000</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70000+</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Median: 12430 Male, 7276 Female

Total Number: 55435 Male, 50464 Female

* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.

Housing

Table 15 indicates the nature of the dwelling occupancy for Vietnam-born people. Considering the high unemployment rates, low income levels and the relatively short time that most Vietnamese people have been in Australia, what is striking about these figures is the high rate of home ownership. To create this level of 52% of dwellings being owned or being purchased there has usually been considerable pooling of resources between family members. Indicative of this is that the median number of residents in each house is 5.42. It is also likely that informal sources of income such as cash-in-hand payments for labour which are not officially reported contribute to the ability of so many Vietnamese families to buy their own homes. Home-ownership is extremely important for many Vietnamese, most of whom place a high priority on being able to share and, eventually, pass on their property with their children. Hidden behind these figures is that many Vietnamese are highly mobile, usually relocating to
higher status areas at each move, whether renting or buying. This is indicative of the differential status Vietnamese people attach to different types and locations of housing.

Table 15

Percentage* Distribution of Nature of Dwelling Occupancy – 1991 Census: Total Vietnam-Born

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Dwelling Occupancy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Owned</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Purchased</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rented</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Not Stated</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Number of Bedrooms in Dwelling</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Number of Residents in Dwelling</td>
<td>5.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>122325</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* Percentages may not total 100.0 per cent due to rounding.
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