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‘Vietnam is my country land, China is my hometown’: Chinese communities in transition in the south of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Studies of Southeast Asian Chinese are voluminous; yet, those about the Chinese in Vietnam are comparatively few. This article provides an updated account of the Chinese Vietnamese with focuses on the Chinese associations in the South of Vietnam and the shifting Chinese identity. Many have discussed the Chinese Vietnamese who fled Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s, however, little is known about the plights of the Chinese inside Vietnam during those decades. This article elaborates on their situations in the post-unification decade in Ho Chi Minh City and the subsequent changes after the *doi moi* reforms in the 1990s. It will show how a liberalized economy and accommodative ethnic policies have resulted in a more proactive relationship between the Chinese minority and the Vietnamese society, which consequentially led to changes in the relationship between the Chinese in Vietnam and China.

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Introduction

The Chinese in Vietnam have often been considered a ‘problematic’ minority. Their integration into the Vietnamese nation and local allegiance have been, in different periods, of political concern to the Vietnamese regimes. The role of the Chinese as an intermediary class in business and trade under the French colonial rule and their prominent wealth invited the jealousy of the local population and the suspicion of the Vietnamese authorities.¹ The Chinese in Vietnam were also targets of co-optation by the Kuomintang (KMT) and Chinese Communist Party since the first half of the twentieth century. As stated by Ungar, from the early twentieth century, the history of the Chinese community in Vietnam has marked ‘a pattern of powerful groups competing for the allegiance of this growing community’.²

Similar to the Chinese populations in other parts of Southeast Asia, the Chinese in Vietnam suffered from either exclusive policies or coercive assimilative measures of different hostile regimes. Chinese migrants in Southeast Asian countries often lived under the political shadow cast by shifting diplomatic relationships between China and their host countries.³ Diplomatic tension and ideological struggles had negative effects on the Chinese subjects dwelling in these Southeast Asian countries. While independence movements swept through Southeast Asia in the second half of the twentieth

century, China emerged as a communist state. Hence, the Chinese in capitalist Southeast Asian countries were regarded with suspicion by their respective governments as 'potential conduits for the penetration of Chinese communism'.⁴

Despite the fact that Vietnam, like China, was a socialist state by 1976, and theoretically should have had no worries about communist infiltration, the loyalty of the Chinese Vietnamese to Vietnam was still suspected. It further became a stringent problem when the Vietnamese communists gradually came to bad terms with China after the end of the Vietnam War. Ironically enough, it was in Vietnam, once China's 'closest' communist ally, that a long period of political coercion was enacted over its Chinese populations. It was also from Vietnam that the largest exodus of Chinese refugees occurred. Having gone through the turbulent decade of the Vietnam War, and the anti-capitalist and anti-Chinese periods from the 1970s to the 1980s, the Chinese Vietnamese became economically and culturally active again in post-*doi moi* Vietnam. Some have become prominent business tycoons in different sectors, such as banking and property development.⁵

This paper seeks to examine the transition of the Chinese communities in southern Vietnam since the opening of Vietnam in the late 1980s. By analysing the changing roles of the Chinese community organizations, *hoi quan*, and their activities, and the plights of the Chinese with a focus on their education, language use, and identity change, the paper argues that the Chinese in Vietnam have repositioned themselves as an organic part of the ethno-cultural landscape of Vietnam. Unlike the early Chinese sojourners before the Vietnam War, who might not have felt the need to actively integrate into the Vietnamese society,⁶ new generations of the Chinese, born since the 1970s, have enjoyed new opportunities provided by the reform policies to work side by side with Vietnamese for their economic well-being. They have adapted quickly and responded positively to the rapidly changing political economy in Vietnam, which is also shaped by its relations with China and global politics.

To date, studies about Chinese in Vietnam are comparatively few; a large number of studies have been devoted to the exodus of the Vietnamese and Chinese Vietnamese refugees during the late 1970s. Yet, little was known of the plight of the ethnic Chinese inside Vietnam in the 1980s. The sections below will provide narratives and analyses about the status of the Chinese *hoi quan* (congregation halls) and Chinese education in the post-unification decade, and their subsequent changes after the *doi moi* reforms in the 1990s. The author argues that a liberalized economy and more 'liberal' ethnic policies of the government have achieved more than previous times in integrating the Chinese.

The author has carried out field research on the Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) since 2008. A number of the field trips to HCMC were conducted between 2010 and 2012 for the purpose of collecting data for this article.⁷ With the help of two local research assistants in HCMC, a survey was conducted in 2011 amongst 115 Chinese Vietnamese in order to understand their use of languages, identity, and change of attitude towards the Vietnamese society. Fieldwork was continued in early 2016 and in the summer of 2017 to gather updated information from the Chinese associations and community leaders in HCMC. A total of 28 interviews were conducted in Cantonese with Chinese Vietnamese of different ages. Excerpts from interviews used in the article were translated by the author; any discrepancies are the fault of the author.

Background

The Hoa in Vietnam

The Chinese, labelled ‘*Hoa*’, are one of the 53 ethnic minorities in Vietnam. There are about one million ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, and around half of them live in HCMC.⁸ Most of these Chinese families have been living in Vietnam for over three – four generations, and many of the locally born generations consider Vietnam their home. Having lived through different chaotic periods from the 1960s to the 1980s, the *Hoa* in the south have since the 1990s benefited much from Vietnam’s economic reforms and re-emerged as an economically active group.⁹ Before this, however, the *Hoa* had been subjected to various coercive assimilation policies.

In the mid-1950s, the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem tried to impose more control on the *hoa* and implemented assimilation policies. In December 1955, all children of Vietnamese-Chinese marriages were made Vietnamese citizens. In August 1956, all Chinese were ordered to adopt a Vietnamese name, with a big fine imposed on those who refused to do so. The same year, those Chinese who did not register for Vietnamese citizenship were banned from engaging in 11 specified occupations, which effectively took away the livelihood of many. To avoid the closure of their business, some Chinese registered for Vietnamese citizenship, while others put up resistance.¹⁰ The southern government also intervened in Chinese education by requiring the Vietnamese language be used in all Chinese schools and appointing Vietnamese school principals. In response to the harsh measures, the KMT government, which supported Chinese education in the south, tried to negotiate with the southern government. However, it was the continued protests and market boycotts (which threatened to handicap the economy) organized by the Chinese that forced the southern government to soften its stand.¹¹ Yet, pragmatic enough, many Chinese gradually accepted Vietnamese citizenship in order to enhance their livelihood and make their life easier in Vietnam.¹²

With the end of the Vietnam War drawing near and the victory of the Vietnamese communists imminent, those who worked for the southern government began to flee. In April 1975, around 150,000 officials and soldiers of the Saigon government fled Vietnam; among them were the Chinese officials and capitalists.¹³ After Vietnam’s unification, the communists began to extend their socialist transformation programmes to the south. The ‘capitalists’ were targeted for re-education’, and their wealth was mostly confiscated. Many had attempted to flee; those who failed to do so were sent to New Economic Zones for retraining and work on the vast undeveloped areas. From 1975 to 1977, over 20,000 left.¹⁴ Another exodus occurred between 1977 and 1979 when China-Vietnam diplomatic relations fell out, finally leading to a border war in February 1979 and a border closure for 10 years.¹⁵ An estimated 60–70 per cent of those who left Vietnam from 1978 to 1979 were Chinese.¹⁶

For those who escaped across land borders to China, many ended up in the refugee farm-camps¹⁷ in China’s southern border regions. A majority of the escapees embarked upon sea voyages to reach Hong Kong and some Southeast Asian countries, where they were placed in refugee camps to wait for the chance to be deported to a third country in the West. After 1981, the Chinese as well as the Vietnamese continued to escape, but in smaller numbers.¹⁸

The *doi moi* (renovation and new) policies implemented since 1986 have provided new spaces for the Chinese to be actively involved in trade and businesses again. In addition, the

Vietnamese state also gradually amended its attitude towards this ‘resourceful’ minority (particularly in view of the *Hoa’s* abundant ties to overseas financial capital),¹⁹ and adjusted its overall ethnic policies to make them more accommodative and to improve state-minority relationships.²⁰ The Chinese now enjoy much flexibility in resuming many of their overseas connections as well as maintaining Chinese education and ethnic customs.

Overseas Chinese identity and loyalty

Managing the loyalty and identity of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asian contexts has long been a hot topic in scholarly studies.²¹ Abundant work has contributed to the debates over the identity and cultural changes of the Chinese overseas. Yet, amidst divergent discussions, there is one well-acknowledged view in the scholarship of overseas Chinese studies: Chinese culture is not static, and neither is Chinese identity. Although Chinese overseas in various destinations have maintained their Chinese distinctness, they are not a homogenous group.²² Moreover, Chinese identification has increasingly tilted towards a cultural, rather than a political, China. Wang, for example, argues that it is the ‘culture China’, not the ‘politics China’ that Chinese overseas have been affiliated with.²³

Gosling uses the term ‘intermediate Chinese’ to denote the Chinese in Southeast Asia, who ‘develop different levels of adaptation, involving a variety of different identities’.²⁴ Southeast Asian Chinese often mix elements of Chinese and indigenous cultures to adapt to local situations. Tan, on the other hand, employs the concept of ‘Chinese ethnological field’ to frame the study of the continuity and transformation of Chinese culture, produced and reproduced by Chinese overseas in different social contexts.²⁵ Within the overarching Chinese ethnological field, there is a wide variety of Chineseness. There are different groups of specific dialects, upholding different cultural strategies: some speak their dialects, some do not; some practice Chinese religions and festive rituals while others turn to foreign religions; some continue to migrate as others choose to come to terms with their Asian settlement.²⁶

The Chinese in Southeast Asia do not simply assimilate, nor do they segregate entirely from the local societies. Different groups acculturated with the destination societies in different ways and to different extents. On the other hand, preserving and maintaining one’s ethnic attributes and cultural practices should not be taken right away as ‘evidence’ for non-adaptation. Wickberg has examined how old and new Chinese migrants living in the global city of Vancouver perform different versions of Chineseness. He stresses that the process of selecting ‘traditions’ and ‘performing’ different ways of being Chinese are in fact a required process of adaptation:

[T]he forms of Chineseness chosen and presented to others must be accepted to both other Chinese and the local population as a whole, while also satisfying the immigrants’ own values and the heritage they hope to give to their children. These choices and presentation also deal with national and local classifications and stereotypes about them.... The task of creating – or recreating – Chineseness is only part of what adaptation requires. There is also the matter of the local framework: opportunities, cultural definitions and restraints in the Global City as a whole: matters that may be defined nationally and locally (p. 177 & p. 179).

Continuous Chinese migrations since the 1980s have further complicated the migrant’s ‘Chinese identity’ and intensified the differentiations amongst Chinese overseas in and

beyond Asia.²⁷ Indeed, over the past few decades, volumes and volumes of overseas-Chinese studies have deliberated different terms that discuss the variance of integration and sojourning experiences of the Southeast Asian Chinese or Chinese Southeast Asians.²⁸ This paper will add to these discussions with updated accounts and analysis of the *Hoa* in Vietnam. It will show how the Chinese Vietnamese have been repositioning themselves in the contexts of the rapidly changing political economy of Vietnam and its continuous integration into the global economy. It argues that by being economically active, the *Hoa* have turned to becoming a contributive minority to the economic development of post-reform Vietnam. Moreover, through re-ethnicization, the Chinese play the role of a proactive minority, weaving Vietnam's diverse ethno-social fabric. Amongst the post-war generations, China is hardly an 'imagined community'²⁹ that would command their loyalty. To them, China is where their ancestors originated, and where they may find some cultural roots.

The Chinese *hoi quan* in the south

There are over 400,000 Chinese in HCMC, representing 8.5 per cent of the city's population.³⁰ The Chinese are organized through dialect-based community organizations, labelled *hoi quan* in Vietnamese (literally meaning congregation hall; *huiguan* in Mandarin). The five main dialect groups include the Cantonese, the Teochiu, Hokkien, Hakka, and Hainan³¹; each has its own *hoi quan*, with a temple attached to it. Before unification, these halls and associations used to play a central role in servicing the different aspects of life in the Chinese communities. All *hoi quan* hosted a temple catering to the religious life of the Chinese. *Hoi quan* also established their own community hospitals, repository halls and cemeteries, and built schools for the education of the children of Chinese families.³²

However, in 1975, when the communist regime took Saigon, all Chinese schools were confiscated by the state and turned into Vietnamese schools. Furthermore, as the tension between China and Vietnam escalated, Chinese education was totally banned. Although the Chinese organizations and congregation halls were still allowed to operate, they all adopted a low profile. As one interviewee said, 'In those years, few people came to worship at the temple.'³³ As the state was against superstitious activities, people became less religious.' Thus, the *hoi quan* became inactive for some years. For example, the Nghia An Hoi Quan of the Teochiu Chinese only occasionally organized Teochiu operas as cultural activities in the decade after the war. Besides these, not much went on. It was the reform in the late 1980s that opened up new spaces for the *hoi quan* to revive their work amongst the Chinese.

Today, all *hoi quan* are managed by a standing committee, whose members hold office for 5 years. A number of these members are business people or people of status. For example, the past or present chairpersons of the Nghia An Hoi Quan are both amongst the richest Chinese in Vietnam. The chairperson of the Quyen Fu Hoi Quan (of the Hainanese) was once an influential banker who headed the first Chinese-run commercial bank in Vietnam. Since the 1990s, *hoi quan* have become active in organizing community work and cultural activities, serving mainly the Chinese of their own group. For example, resourceful *hoi quan*, such as those of the Cantonese, the Teochiu people, Hainanese, and Fukienese, have distributed charity allowances for vulnerable groups, including orphans, poor families and the elderly. They also provide scholarships or study assistance for university students from their communities. After

floods or other natural disasters, the Chinese organizations have also contributed to disaster relief.³⁴

Hanging on the walls of the offices of these Chinese congregation halls are eye-catching ‘awards’ (*bang khen*), displaying the government’s recognition of the Chinese contribution to the well-being of the local communities. Such *bang khen* were awarded to both the associations and individuals, acknowledging their good charity work and social contributions. Some of the chairpersons of the organizations were also awarded the Third Level Labor Award.³⁵ The shining *bang khen* offer multiple political meanings. They manifest how the local *Hoa* associations have tried to work in collaborative spirit with the government to fulfil their social responsibility (taking care of their own groups) and to promote the spirit of community development, proving to the Vietnamese authorities that they are one of those adaptive and responsible minority groups.

Award-giving as a political tool for assimilating governed subjects is a common practice all over the world. ‘Prizing’ (and related competition) is one of the five major elements of the political structure within the game theory of politics developed by Bailey.³⁶ Within such political ritual, both the award-giver and the award-receiver display a ritualistic acknowledgement of each other’s position on the power hierarchy. The ritual of prize-giving and prize-receiving has fitted into the official integrative policy towards minorities, and the *Hoa*’s cooperative attitude has made it easier for them to find an adaptive position within the increasingly open economy of Vietnam. The Chinese are ready to play along with such award-presenting games and accept the hierarchy of the existing political order – the Vietnamese government as the award-giver and ruler, and the *Hoa* as the award-receiver and subject. Through these award-giving activities, the roles of both the Vietnamese government and the *Hoa* are clearly played out.

In addition to demonstrating their effort to be a cooperative social unit, the *Hoa* associations are also active in knitting the ethno-cultural fabric. Since the 2000s, the Vietnamese government has been particularly eager to promote culture for tourism and to preserve and revive minority heritage in order to build a multicultural nation.³⁷ In 2007, the government organized the first national Chinese cultural carnival, showing typical Chinese lion dances, processions of opera characters and religious pantheon, as well as exhibiting other Chinese customs. By invitation, the associations have been supporting units of such activities, providing financing and information. The most recent festive procession was held on the 15th day of the Chinese lunar new year of 2017.

The day is called *yuanxiao* (元宵) in Mandarin Chinese, and *nguyen tieu* in Vietnamese. The celebration consisted of plenty of colourful procession groups, marching and dancing through the main streets of district five, the hub of Chinese settlement. People donned costumes and wore make-up to play the popular characters in Chinese operas. Some performed on pogo sticks, while others demonstrated lion and feathered fan dances. Their purpose was to create a cheerful and hilarious (*nao-nhiet*) minority event and to promote ethnic harmony in the city.³⁸ Since early 2017, the cultural office of the city government has been preparing a proposal to make the Chinese *nguyen tieu* an intangible part of HCMC’s cultural heritage. One interviewee from the Cantonese *hoi quan* said, ‘We would play a supportive role and will provide information when the office needs us.’³⁹

Such celebratory performances and cultural programmes broadcasted and reported in local and national media,⁴⁰ ‘reinvented’ Chinese customs as examples of the colourful minority heritage of Vietnam. These actions, again, convey important political

messages. Allowing the Chinese to excel in promoting their cultural heritage during festival days was consistent with the official policy of weaving all minority populations into Vietnam's ethno-cultural tapestry. Chinese heritage and culture has been presented as an 'exotic' patch of the multi-ethnic mosaic.⁴¹ Moreover, 'new' heritage events may always be promoted as products to attract tourists.

Alongside the state's initiatives to promote ethnic cultures, some *hoi quan* also grabbed the opportunity to promote the learning of Chinese dialects and culture among the younger generations of their own groups. For example, the *hoi quan* of the Teochiu group conducted Teochiu languages classes every Sunday for free in order to preserve the use of the language. There was also a proposal to start classes for playing Teochiu musical instruments. This case of 're-ethnicising' the Chinese may act as a soft model of incorporating ethnic minorities into the national body of Vietnam. It is in sharp contrast with the high-handed policies during the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in the 1950s as well as the harsher integrative policies implemented by the communist party in North Vietnam in the 1950s (Ungar, 1987–1988) and in southern Vietnam in the late 1970s and 1980s (see the sections below).

Chinese education and language uses from the 1980s to the present

From sojourners to a lost generation

Despite the fact that many of the ethnic Chinese families have been in Vietnam for three – four generations, their everyday communication cannot dispense with the Chinese dialects, and Cantonese is the most common lingua franca amongst different Chinese groups. Before the end of the Vietnam War, most Chinese still spoke with each other in either Cantonese or their group dialect, and their children went to Chinese language schools, which thrived during the French period. In 1949, a survey showed that there were 97 primary and secondary Chinese schools in Saigon-Cholon, with over 25,200 students.⁴² During the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, Chinese schools were required to provide Vietnamese classes too, as one of Diem's policies was to localize the Chinese. However, the Chinese students did not pay much attention to learning the Vietnamese language. A number of interviewees confirmed that before the end of the war, the Chinese in general did not like to learn Vietnamese. Chinese people in Cholon mingled with other Chinese, and they only spoke Vietnamese for general exchanges with the Vietnamese. Interviewees who were born in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (either in China or in Vietnam) confessed to me that they mainly made friends with the Chinese; Vietnamese were acquaintances. A 69-year-old Chinese woman said:

The earlier generations of Chinese in Vietnam, like my mother, did not speak much Vietnamese. They stayed in Cholon, where most of the people were Chinese and where most of the time people used Cantonese for communication. Even Vietnamese who came here to sell things spoke in Chinese. My mother could only count 1 to 100 in Vietnamese, and she knew how to say her home address in Vietnamese in order to tell the rickshaw man. That was it. I did not learn Vietnamese before primary 3. But after the French were gone, our school had to add a Vietnamese class once a week. Some students did not attend this class, as they did not like to learn the language. The Vietnamese teachers were also quite loose in disciplining the 'runaways'.⁴³

Secondary schools provided more Vietnamese learning. According to a Chinese interviewee in his mid-sixties, the school would teach subjects in Chinese in the morning and

repeat the subjects in Vietnamese in the afternoon. This was called the ‘double curricula’ at the time. Again, students usually paid more attention to the Chinese than to the Vietnamese subjects. This interviewee said: ‘At the time, the Diem government was in collaboration with the KTM government – an “anti-communist alliance” (*fangong lianmeng* 反共聯盟). Thus, the Vietnamese were not that strict in demanding that the Chinese take Vietnamese education seriously. It was done with “one eye open, one eye closed”.’⁴⁴

The socialist liberation of the south and south-north unification brought disruptive impacts on the education of the Chinese and their everyday life. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Vietnamese communists mainly aimed to extend to the south the socialist programmes and to assimilate the Chinese. Thus, all Chinese language schools were confiscated and turned into normal Vietnamese schools. When the tension between China and Vietnam escalated, Chinese classes were totally banned. Chinese families had no choice but to send their children to Vietnamese schools. However, many families were sceptical of the new government and its policies. For those who did not like to see the assimilation of their children or grandchildren, attending Vietnamese schools became a problem. Some chose not to send their children to school, but invited private Chinese tutors to teach them at home. However, this kind of home learning had to be conducted secretly.

Lien,⁴⁵ born in 1974, had only attended a kindergarten for half a year in 1977 before her education was stopped. Instead of going to a Vietnamese school, Lien’s parents invited Chinese private tutors to teach her and her young brothers and sister at home. She said:

In those days, we had to hide and learn secretly at home. Sometimes, when the police patrolled more frequently, we had to stop classes for a whole month. We were destitute of everything; we did not even have enough pens and paper notebooks... We only had yellow-paper notebooks. Sometimes the teacher would try to encourage us to learn by using white-paper notebooks as awards.⁴⁶

A survey⁴⁷ about the education of the Chinese in Cholon in 1991 found 96,000 youngsters from the age of 6 to 14 who did not go to school. Among them, 16,000 kids did not know Vietnamese and 67,200 dropped out of school after they finished primary education. An interviewee said: ‘In the early years after the unification, people in the south were not sure about what the communist government’s policies would be like, and they were extremely uncertain about their future. Also, many Chinese families had overseas connections; they would wait for a chance to go abroad’.⁴⁸

Mr Duong, a 61-year-old man who managed to finish his education in a Vietnamese university in the mid-1970s, reported that the post-unification society in HCMC was in general a ‘grey society’.

I enrolled in the university in 1974. After the liberation, my university study was disrupted for a while. Teachers were changed by the party, only a few of those who were ‘red’ enough remained. We received ideological education in the university. I was having some youthful courage then, sometime even to the point of challenging those political tutors. I finally completed my university education, but as one of the few Chinese students, I had a suppressed psyche...⁴⁹

After graduation, Mr Duong worked at a state trading company. However, the position was a redundant one. Like many other Chinese, he had once tried to escape from Vietnam, but he did not succeed. He said that many were being cheated; they paid a lot of gold, only to learn that they were trapped by the police. As he described it, people who spent their youth in the decades of 1970s and 1980s were a lost generation.

We were unsure about the future; many wanted to flee. We had a common line in those days: ‘even the light pole wants to run’. But not all had enough money or courage. One day I went out to the shore and saw people were caught and handcuffed by the police. Then I realized that many had been cheated..., we were a lost generation.⁵⁰

A proactive minority: doi moi and new opportunities

The post-unification assimilation and restrictive policies in the mid-1970s had thwarted many Chinese families; on the contrary, the *doi moi* policies implemented by the Hanoi authority in the late 1980s were welcomed by the Chinese and had opened up new opportunities for ‘Chinese economies’ to thrive. Soon after the renovation reform, many Chinese in HCMC began to engage in trade and business. From 1995 to 2005, the number of private enterprises opened by the Chinese increased 20 times to over 27,000, representing 30 per cent of all the licensed enterprises.⁵¹ Businesses set up by the Chinese covered a wide range of sectors: light manufacturing, hotel and restaurant businesses, banking and finance, property, trading and services. By the mid-2000s, the *Hoa* had contributed to 30 per cent of the city’s GDP,⁵² 30–50 per cent of all commercial activities in HCMC.⁵³ Yet, despite the activeness of the *Hoa*, there remained limitations to the development of *Hoa* businesses, especially in terms of capital accessibility.⁵⁴

The rapprochement of the Vietnamese and Chinese state in the late 1980s and the resumption of the Vietnamese–Chinese diplomatic relationship in 1991 helped to ease Vietnamese control of the *Hoa*. Towards the end of the 1980s, Chinese language centres were reopened. In the few years between 1988 and 1992, at least a dozen *huawen* centres (Chinese language centres) were reopened.⁵⁵ With this new learning opportunity, Chinese youth ‘returned’ to school. One of these, Thanh, born in 1978, did not attend school until 1988 when he enrolled in one of the Chinese language centres. He said: ‘My parents let me learn from private teachers before that. I was much older than my classmates. Yet, because my Chinese was good, I graduated earlier than my classmates.’⁵⁶

Another interviewee, Vi, born in 1981, began to attend classes in a Chinese language centre in 1988. Before that, he was taught by Chinese tutors at home. Besides regaining Chinese education, Chinese youth in that period also picked up Vietnamese learning. Vi explained the situation of his generation as follows:

In the 1980s, many Chinese parents had bias against Vietnamese education. People returned to get Chinese education, but not many went to Vietnamese classes yet. It was after 1990 when people saw Vietnam’s economy was really growing, they began to realize they needed to know more Vietnamese. When I got my first class in Vietnamese learning in 1993, I was already 12 years old. I was in primary 1. In my class, there were kids older than me, most were Chinese. It was very common for Chinese youngsters to take evening classes in those years to finish primary and secondary education. Yet, many did not finish the senior secondary education.⁵⁷

Entering the 1990s, Vietnam had already witnessed the positive results brought by the economic reforms. While returning to school, the new generations of the Chinese (born in the 1970s and 1980s) also noticed that to attain a strong position in the Vietnamese society, one must have a good command of the Vietnamese language. Moreover, the job market had become increasingly competitive, and most companies required applicants to have a secondary school certificate. Thus, in the 1990s, a

common phenomenon amongst Chinese youth was attending evening schools to receive a Vietnamese education. Overall, the new generations of the ethnic Chinese were aware of the need to know Vietnamese well, so that whether or not they worked for Chinese companies, they could better position themselves in the Vietnamese job market. Increased contacts with Vietnamese schoolmates and colleagues also improved their fluency in speaking Vietnamese.

In 2011 I conducted a survey in HCMC with 115 ethnic Chinese,⁵⁸ asking the question: ‘Which are the most usual languages you use in daily life – Chinese or Vietnamese or both?’ The results were as follows: Around 54 per cent of those born in or before the 1960s say Chinese, 8 per cent say Vietnamese, and 38 per cent say both. Among those born in the 1970s and 1980s, only 12 per cent say that Chinese is their usual language. On the contrary, 30 per cent say that Vietnamese is used more, and 52 per cent of them use Vietnamese as frequently as Chinese. In terms of the language spoken in everyday life, the post-war generations have been much more familiar with the use of Vietnamese in their daily interactions when compared to their parents’ generations.

‘Vietnam is my country land and china is my hometown’

In the survey mentioned above, I asked the interviewees their perception of the Chinese identity. Amongst the 115 ethnic Chinese respondents, a majority (80 per cent) of them identify themselves as ‘Chinese in Vietnam’ (*yuenan huaren* 越南華人),⁵⁹ rather than ‘Vietnamese’ (*yuenan ren* 越南人) or ‘overseas Chinese in Vietnam’ (*yuenan huaqiao* 越南華僑).⁶⁰ This result shows that the majority of the Chinese in Vietnam are still maintaining their identity as ‘ethnic Chinese’, recognizing that their ancestors were from China (*goc Hoa*). However, their attitudes towards the place in which they dwell and towards China have significantly changed along with the political and economic transformation in Vietnam and the changing China-Vietnam relations.

Having witnessed the changes of Vietnam since its opening and reform, the post-war generations have been rapidly integrating into the Vietnamese society in HCMC. Though some claimed that Chinese are still discriminated against by the Vietnamese officials and policies,⁶¹ they are willing to work within the present system side by side with the Vietnamese. A Chinese entrepreneur in his mid-forties who opened a printing company in the late 1990s said he had employed both Vietnamese and Chinese workers in his company and would not refrain from doing business with the Vietnamese. He also believed that institutional discrimination against Chinese had diminished.

The new Chinese generations no longer treat themselves as guests; neither do they see the Vietnamese society with estrangement. They witnessed and experienced a difficult period in Vietnam in the late 1970s and the 1980s. However, they are now the generations enjoying the newly emerged prosperity and the plentiful economic opportunities in Vietnam, especially in the south of Vietnam. They acknowledge the rapidly globalizing Vietnamese society and the potentials for Vietnam as it moves towards a more modern and prosperous future. Being one of the fastest growing economies in Asia,⁶² Vietnam has offered new visions and possibilities for this new generation. Their ethnic and cultural capital gained them an advantage in the job market. Not only did they have many chances to work for the abundant foreign companies invested in by Chinese business people from Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, and China, they were also able to build networks

to foreign investors such as those from the above countries, and set up their own businesses. A 35-year-old interviewee commented: ‘We were born and grew up in Vietnam; it is pointless not to speak good Vietnamese and integrate into the society. We are different from our father or grandfather’s generations. We live here in Vietnam. To me, Vietnam is my country land (*zuguo*祖國) while China is my hometown (*guxiang* 故鄉).’⁶³

Fast-paced economic development has allowed the post-war generations of the *Hoa* to manoeuvre for their economic well-being. It is a new space for them to adjust to new perceptions of identity and senses of belonging. Being Chinese in Vietnam is a different experience from being Chinese in China or elsewhere. The *Hoa* in contemporary Vietnam have made a dynamic balance between the use of the Chinese and Vietnamese languages as well as readjusted their positioning in-between the two identities.

Conclusion

The paper has provided an updated account of the Chinese in Vietnam. After decades of political turmoil, the Chinese Vietnamese have been leading a more integrated life in Vietnam. As elaborated in the above accounts and analysis, they are playing a contributive role in the economy and have been repositioning themselves as a proactive part of Vietnam’s diverse ethno-social fabric. The emerging economic strength of Vietnam has persuaded many in the post-war generations of the Chinese Vietnamese that their future lies in Vietnam. To the new Chinese generations, ‘Chinese the culture’ is symbolic and ritualistic, while ‘Vietnam the nation’ is real and substantial.

The reconstruction of the Chinese cultural practices in Vietnam has been an expressive display of Chinese minority culture – celebratory events, language centres, and Chinese charity work – done with the intention to show the *Hoa*’s allegiance to a ‘Chinese cultural identity’ as well as to fit into the official policy line of crafting ethnic solidarity. *Hoa* cultural festivals such as the celebrations of *nguyen tieu*, re-constructed in the post-reform Vietnamese contexts, have marked the ethnic Chinese communities in the south as a contributive group through their colourful performances, processions, and rituals. Whether the Chinese enjoyed seeing them or regarded them as ‘authentic’ became irrelevant. Such trajectories of ‘performing Chineseness’ is thus not so much about upholding the ‘Chinese identity’ against the national Vietnamese identity, but is about the Chinese adaptive repositioning within Vietnam’s ethnic and cultural milieu.

While the new *Hoa* generations still recognize that their cultural roots are back in China, the country ‘China’ does not generate much of an ‘imagined community’ for them. Older Chinese Vietnamese even began to worry about the complete waning of ‘Chineseness’ among the younger generations who were born in or after the 1990s. Many Chinese children stopped learning Chinese as the Vietnamese curriculum became heavier in the secondary school. The case of identity change of the Chinese in Vietnam has provided yet another interesting example of the diversity within the wide spectrum of the variegated modes of integration and localization of the Chinese overseas.

Notes

1. As reported by a number of studies, the *Hoa* enjoyed a prominent economic position in the south before the south-north unification. Many families were extremely wealthy,

controlling large segments of trade and commerce. In 1975, the Chinese in the south controlled 100% of its domestic wholesale trade, 50% of the retail trade, 70% of foreign trade, and 80% of the industry. Li, *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, 232. Prominent Chinese include Tran Thanh (in the rice trade) and Ly Long Than (in the manufacturing and trading of fabrics and textiles) (see Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, 186–198; also see; Li, “In Search of the History,” 52–61. After the socialist transformation of the south, the state confiscated much of this richness.

2. Ungar, *The Struggle over the Chinese*, 596.
3. See discussions in Chan, “Language Power,” 230–51.
4. See Wee and Chan, “Ethnicity and Capital,” 330.
5. Early discussions of the economic reemergence of the *Hoa* can be found in Hai, “The Policies on Chinese Residents” and Tran “*The Ethnic Chinese and Economic*.”
6. There have been some debates among academics about the pre-war situations of the *Hoa*. Li “In Search of the History,” 52–61 for example, argues that Chinese separateness was overestimated. Some of the best discussions of the political organizations and issues of citizenship of the Chinese can be found in Ungar, *The Struggle over the Chinese* and Han “Ethnicity and Capital.” Whether to say that the Chinese were totally segregated from or well integrated with the local Vietnamese can be far from the truth. From my long-term research amongst the Chinese in HCMC, it is a commonly held belief that the older generations of the Chinese in Cholon (which is about the area of today’s district 5, 6 and 11 in HCMC, the most prosperous commerce and trade centre of the Chinese in Vietnam), though living alongside the Vietnamese, had lived with a sense of superiority to the Vietnamese before the unification. Chinese did not in general mingle well with the Vietnamese and did not take the language of the Vietnamese seriously. If they learned the language, they learned it for business convenience and work. In Saigon-Cholon, in the 1940s, there were Vietnamese language classes provided by private tutors for adults. Li, Xiaoran and Xinfu, *Xidi Nianjian*. For those who engaged in big businesses, especially those who also served directly the interests of the ruling regime, interactions with the Vietnamese were certainly part of their everyday life. On the other hand, it was observed that among those who inhabited the provinces to the south of HCMC, such as the provinces in the Mekong River Delta, the Chinese mingled better with the Vietnamese. It was also in rural regions where Chinese spoke more Vietnamese in their daily life and cross-ethnic marriages were more common. In Cholon, Chinese families did not prefer their children to marry Vietnamese (data from the field).
7. Some of these trips were financed by a Chiang Ching-kuo (CCK) Scholarly Foundation research grant.
8. The *Hoa* populations in Vietnam are distributed unevenly through different regions of the S-shape country. According to Vietnam’s 2009 census, the distribution of Chinese was as follows: 9,421 in Red River Delta (including 2,134 in Hanoi), 42,236 in the Northern Midlands and Mountains, 20,057 in North and South Central Coast, 23,882 in the Central Highlands, 550,297 in the Southeast (including 414,045 in HCMC), and 177,178 in Mekong River Delta “The 2009 Vietnam Population and Housing Census.”
9. In the 1990s, because of the *doi moi* policies, the Chinese became economically active again (see Hai, “The Policies on Chinese Residents”; Tran “*The Ethnic Chinese and Economic*.”).
10. Amer “*The Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam*,” 19.
11. Amer “*The Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam*,” 20–1; also see Marsot “*The Chinese Community in Vietnam*.”
12. Tran “*The Ethnic Chinese and Economic*,” 43.
13. Tran “An Analysis of the Population,” 60.
14. Amer “*The Ethnic Chinese in Vietnam*,” 56.
15. Chen “*The Strategic Triangle and Regional*”; Chang “*The Sino-Vietnamese*.”
16. Amer “The Boat People Crisis,” 36.

17. To understand the history and plights of the Southeast Asian Chinese refugees in state-run refugee farms in China, see Han, "The Demise of China's Overseas," 33–58; Elaine, "Laura Madokor and Glen Peterson," 131–36.
18. See Chan, "Revisiting the Vietnamese Refugee Era," 3–19.
19. Tran, *The Ethnic Chinese and Economic Development*.
20. One of those policies was the 62nd decree issued on 8 November 1995, which aimed at providing concrete guidelines for crafting new policies towards incorporating the Chinese minority in the new economic age. To achieve 'great national solidarity', Chinese language education, once prohibited in schools, was allowed to be taught in primary and secondary schools. Chinese was also a foreign language subject in the university (data from the field, June 2011).
21. For examples, Cushman and Wang, *Changing Identities of the Southeast Asian Chinese*; Freedman, *Political Participation and Ethnic Minorities*; Gomez and Hsiao, *Chinese Business in Southeast Asia*; Laurence and Cartier, *The Chinese Diaspora*; Suryadinata, *Migration, Indigenization, and Interaction*; Tong, *Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia* and Wang, *China and Southeast Asia*.
22. See discussions in note 4 above.
23. See discussions in Wang, *China and Southeast Asia*, 55–66.
24. Gosling "Changing Chinese Identities in Southeast Asia," 2.
25. Tan, *Chinese Overseas*.
26. See various cases and debates in Tan, *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora*.
27. See discussions in Kuehn, *Diasporic Chineseness after the Rise of China*; Chan and Koh, *New Chinese Migrations*.
28. See Wang, "Sojourning," 1–14 and Suryadinata, "Ethnic Chinese in Southast Asia," 1–24 for meaningful discussions.
29. A term developed by Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
30. Lan "The *Hoa* in HCMC are Flying High under the Reform and Open Policy", 8.
31. Chinese populations in Vietnam were classified into these five 'bang' (groups) according to their (or their ancestors') birthplace or dialect since the French era Purcell, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, 176. Today, the Cantonese are the most abundant in HMC, representing 50 per cent of the *Hoa*, while the second largest group, the Teochiu, take up 30 per cent Lan, "The *Hoa* in HCMC are Flying High under the Reform and Open Policy".
32. In 1949, a survey showed that there were over 200 Chinese language schools (*huaqiao* schools, schools for overseas Chinese) in the south of Vietnam (*Nam Ky*) in 1943–45, see *Xidi Nianjian* Li, Xiaoran and Xinfu, *Xidi nianjian*, 72.
33. Most of the temples of the Chinese *hoi quan* worship Tianhou (goddess of the sea) as the principal deity. They are all fondly labeled as 'ah poh miu' (temple of the grandma) by the locals. The Teochiu *hoi quan* however worships *Guangong* (the martial god of wealth), and is called by the locals, 'ah gong miu', temple of grandpa.
34. Field data collected in June 2011, and July 2017.
35. Those individuals awarded include the chairpersons of the Teochiu, Canton, Hainan, Hokkien associations. All of them were awarded the Third Level Labor Award.
36. Cited in Lewellen "Political Anthropology," 99–100.
37. Relevant discussions can be found in Logan, "Protecting the Tay Nguyen Gongs," 189–207 and Lixinski, "Selecting Heritage," 81–100.
38. Tran, "Chinese Processions in Saigon to Celebrate the Festival of *Yuanxiao*".
39. Interview conducted in HCMC on 4 August 2017.
40. See note 38 above.
41. See discussions about Vietnam's cultural resource governance in Logan, "Protecting the Tay Nguyen Gongs," 189–207.
42. Well-known overseas Chinese schools in those years included Suichen, Lingnan, Yian, Zhiyung, Guangzhao, and Fujian, see *Xidi Nianjian* Li, Xiaoran, Xinfu, *Xidi nianjian*, 72–84.
43. Interview conducted in HCMC on 5 August 2017.
44. See note 39 above.
45. All interviewees' names cited in the article are pseudonyms.

46. Interview conducted in HCMC on 11 July 2012.
47. Van Huy, *Chinese in Vietnam* 242–3, cited in Tran (2001b, p. 47).
48. Interview conducted in HCMC on 15 July 2012.
49. Interview conducted in HCMC on 28 February 2011.
50. *ibid.*
51. Prominent enterprises owned by Chinese Vietnamese include the Viet Hoa Bank, Kinh Do and Bitis see note 30 above; also see note 19 above.
52. see note 30 above.
53. See Lim “Firm Entry Modes and Chinese Business Networks,” 176–94; there are also relevant discussions in Lindahl and Thomsen, “Private Business and Socio-economic Network Relations,” 129–55.
54. See discussions in Lim “Firm Entry Modes and Chinese Business Networks,” 176–94.
55. Field data from HCMC, July 2012.
56. Interview conducted in HCMC on 27 February 2011.
57. Interview conducted in HCMC on 12 July 2012.
58. The survey was conducted from January to June 2011. A total of 115 respondents answered the survey questionnaire. The numbers of respondents in different age groups are as follows: 2 born in the 1930s; 7 born in the 1940s; 11 born in the 1950s; 17 born in the 1960s; 30 born in the 1970s; 38 born in the 1980s; 10 born in the 1990s.
59. The three choices given in the survey include ‘Chinese in Vietnam’ (*yuht naahm wa yahn* in Cantonese and *yuenan huaren* in Mandarin), ‘Vietnamese’ (*yuht naahm yahn* in Cantonese, and *yuenan ren* in Mandarin) and ‘overseas Chinese in Vietnam’ (*yuht naahm wa kiu* in Cantonese, *yuenan huaqiao* in Mandarin, and *hoa kieu tai Viet Nam* in Vietnamese). The last term differs from the first one by its stress on the sojourning identity.
60. Han, “Spoiled Guest or Dedicated Patriots,” 1–36 has reported that in the early 1970s, there was a subtle change in the term used by the official organization of the Chinese in Vietnam. The term *huaqiao* was replaced by *huaren*. The two terms differ by the fact that *huaqiao* denotes the connotation of sojourning, temporarily living elsewhere, while *huaren* means the ethnic Chinese. The terms used for the Chinese in different Southeast Asian countries and in different epochs actually involve complex ethnic politics. See Han, “Spoiled Guest or Dedicated Patriots,” 20.
61. Despite the fact that the Vietnamese government has been recruiting communist members from the Chinese communities, many ethnic Chinese still felt that it would be difficult for Chinese to attain a political career or become higher-up officials. In general, Chinese are cautious about issues of politics, and would avoid touching on any political topics, especially issues related to Vietnam-China relationships (field data, Aug, 2017).
62. Vietnam recorded one of the most robust economic growth rates since the late 1990s amongst ASEAN countries. Its GDP growth rate averaged 6.19 per cent from 2000 to 2016, see Trading economics, “Vietnam GDP Growth Rate, 2000–2017”, also see Hong Kong Trade Development Council, *Vietnam, A Fast Growing Market in ASEAN*.
63. Interview conducted in HCMC on 6 August 2017.

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