**Vietnamese diaspora - the Việt Kiều**

‘Việt Kiều’ is the popular Sino-Vietnamese term of reference for overseas Vietnamese; it is most commonly used for reference to Vietnamese that left Vietnam after the end of Second Indochina Conflict (‘Vietnam War’) in 1975, and their offspring (Koh, 2015).

The Vietnamese diaspora is diverse. In terms of groups of emigrants, prior to 1975 most migration was regional, with China, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand being common destinations; most of the Western world’s overseas Vietnamese were in France corresponding with that era of French colonial rule. The total overseas population would have numbered around 600,000. During and after the Second Indochina Conflict (1954-75), a mass exodus occurred in multiple waves, comprising refugees from the conflict itself, skilled professionals escaping communism, and those that exited as a result of post-war deprivations; each wave experienced its own unique exit and resettlement context (Y. W. Chan, 2012; Espiritu & Tran, 2002; Kula et al., 2021). The vast majority resettled in the United States (where nearly half the current 4.5 million+ Việt Kiều still reside) and a selection of other Western countries, among the 100+ countries now hosting Việt Kiều (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011; Koh, 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Việt Nam - Consular Department, 2012; Robinson, 1998). In recent years, the net emigration is likely driven by labor migrants and record numbers of students from Vietnam pursuing studies overseas (Miller, 2015).

Despite the traditional predominance of anti-communism identity politics, Việt kiều are politically diverse as well. The regional emigrant community of Việt Kiều from the French colonial era tends to align with the communist movement and the government of Vietnam (Goscha, 2013). The same holds for the pre-War community in France as well, but this changes post-War: Bousquet observed that the earlier cohort were generally leftist and pro-Hanoi; those arriving after 1975 were primarily war refugees and tended to be anti-communists (Bousquet, 1991).

Indeed, staunch anti-communism is traditionally a central feature of the majority of the Vietnamese diaspora population, based simply on the sheer numbers that exited as refugees/exiles (Dorais, 2001; Hoang, 2016; Valverde, 2012). However, post-war, besides the refugee Việt kiều, there were also ‘government Việt kiều’, sent out by the Vietnamese communist state to study or work abroad, mostly to former Soviet bloc countries; moreover, newer waves of migrants in the modern era (since 1990s) include those born under the communist state and emigrating to pursue their own work or study abroad opportunities (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011; Miller, 2015; A. T. Nguyen, 2015; T. Nguyen, 2017). Scholars have increasingly noted heterogeneity within the refugee Việt kiều as well, and the need to transcend overly simplistic anti-communist identity politics in defining them (Le, 2015; A. T. Nguyen, 2015; Phan, 2015).

Another element of the diversity of the Vietnamese diaspora is ethnicity: overseas Vietnamese of Chinese ethnicity are a distinct sub-class of Vietnamese (both historically, in Vietnam, and as a part of the current Vietnamese diaspora). This community, in the past considered ‘Hoa kiều’ (overseas Chinese) within Vietnam, had its own exacerbated conditions in post-War Vietnam due to historical discrimination and Chinese-Vietnamese diplomatic fallout, and formed the bulk of the ‘boat people’ comprising the second exodus wave in 1978-79 (Y. W. Chan, 2012). However, they would ultimately be lumped into the overall Vietnamese diaspora and could actually return as Việt kiều, much as any other overseas Vietnamese (Y. W. Chan, 2013).

Interestingly, perhaps what binds the diverse Vietnamese diaspora together is the Vietnamese state itself. Reforms and legislation of the 2000s have quite directly encompassed all the aforementioned categories of emigrants, their families, and their descendants as being truly Vietnamese: visa exemptions and reclaiming citizenship as dual nationals became a reality for overseas Vietnamese, and increasing return migration became inevitable (Koh, 2015).

**Việt Kiều return migration – state policies and opportunities driving increasing numbers**

Since 1986, Vietnam’s đổi mới (‘renovation’), ostensibly economic reforms towards a free-market economic policy (Boothroyd et al., 2000; Kshetri, 2009), also set the stage for broader global engagement and more specifically, the beginning of the decline of the uneasy and antagonistic relationship of the state with the post-War Việt Kiều. Though not directly geared toward gradual democratization of the political system, “the đổi mới spirit of openness has affected almost all spheres of Vietnam’s national polity and society” (Koh, 2015, p. 181).

Since the 2000s, corresponding with benefits to Vietnam brought about by remittances, investments, knowledge and technology transfers, access to markets and global political influence through overseas Vietnamese (Carruthers, 2007), the Vietnamese government has undertaken more vigorous and welcoming political and economic reforms packaged with positive public discourses into diaspora policies designed to stimulate Việt kiều return (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011; T. Nguyen, 2017). The landmark state policy regarding overseas Vietnamese is undoubtedly ‘Nghị Quyết Số 36/NQ-TW’, commonly known as Resolution 36, passed in June 2004; this and subsequent legislation established welcoming conditions for Việt kiều return including visa exemptions, home ownership rights, a single price system for all Vietnamese, and dual nationality (Koh, 2015; T. Nguyen, 2017). “Supporting and protecting overseas Vietnamese communities” in fact became a pro-active goal of the state (LAW No. 33/2009/QH 12 of JUNE 16, 2009: Law on Overseas Representative Missions of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam).

The policies have clearly driven increasing short-term visits back to Vietnam and even long-term return migration. As cited in Müller (2021): an estimated 70,000 return visits by Việt Kiều in 1990 (Schiele, 2017) grew to an average of 500,000 visits each year between 2005-2012 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Việt Nam - Consular Department, 2012); many visitors make repeated visits. Similarly, Koh reports that although precise figures are unavailable, “anecdotal evidence indicates that increasing numbers of second-generation Việt Kiều are returning to Vietnam, specifically to Hồ Chí Minh City, to live and work” (Koh, 2015, p. 179) and that according to local press, Hồ Chí Minh City hosts around two million overseas Vietnamese residents.

The reality of the return migration experience does not always live up to the policy, however, to the extent that it has been described as ‘political rhetoric’, or even ‘patronizing discourse’ (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011). For example, Việt Kiều may face insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles attempting to claim rights to buy property or reclaim Vietnamese nationality; and part of this inconsistency potentially stems from the state’s own fears about political change that could come from being truly open to the diversity in the diaspora (Koh, 2015). The state itself acknowledged the challenges of fully living up to the spirit of đổi mới and Resolution 36: “Overseas Vietnamese do not have the same rights as resident citizens in terms of investment and business procedures in Việt Nam. The fact that enterprises that are established by overseas Vietnamese are considered to be foreign-invested enterprises creates unfavourable conditions compared to the conditions provided for domestic investors. While it takes in-country investors only five to seven days to complete business registration procedures, it can take months or even a year for foreign investors to complete complicated procedures for obtaining an investment license or securing land and house rental” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Việt Nam - Consular Department, 2012, p. 31). Nguyen-Akbar (2016) describes the experiences of business migrants that have faced such bureaucratic hurdles.

If taking full advantage of the Resolution 36 opportunities by Việt Kiều returnees is challenging, identity construction remains even more so -- matters of ‘homecoming’ and ‘belonging’ span the full gamut of transnational diaspora experiences.

**Việt Kiều diaspora and pre-return migrant identity**

The diaspora is estimated to span over 100 countries, with nearly half of the 4.5+ million resettled in the United States (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011; Koh, 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Việt Nam - Consular Department, 2012; Robinson, 1998). The manner of their initial exit and their resettlement context would have varied widely and given rise to diverse notions of identity (Y. W. Chan, 2012; Espiritu & Tran, 2002; Kula et al., 2021). The case of Western-settled Vietnamese is considered more specifically herein. For most Western countries, a substantial Vietnamese presence would have materialized only after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and these populations would have largely been refugees/exiles; this diaspora has since become multigenerational (Kula et al., 2021).

Overall, the diaspora’s identity is deeply linked to the trauma of exit and resettlement during its formation -- the Western perspectives and the tropes of the War and the refugee experience loom large in most media and research on Vietnam (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011; Koh, 2018). Certainly, the anti-communist politics of remembrance in the exile communities pervade especially among the resettled (first) generation (Dang, 2005), with ongoing potential for conflict in Vietnamese overseas communities of over “ideas of nation, history, and (anti)communism” (Su, 2017, p. 77). However, the feelings among the later generation are more dichotomous, at once embracing their resettled Western culture while also recognizing that something is missing (a sense of ‘not belonging’), which could potentially be fulfilled through a reconnection with their ancestral roots (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011; Koh, 2018). Koh (2018) finds that the obvious *othering* that would have been experienced by resettled Vietnamese refugees persists in later generations in the West through the usual ways stemming from their being ‘visible’ ethnic/racial minorities (e.g., facing racism and other negative social experiences). Espiritu and Tran (2002) had found that in one major overseas Vietnamese hub, San Diego, over two-thirds had experienced racism. It is unsurprising such experiences feature commonly in the back stories of returnees (Yee, 2020).

The challenges of the minority experience are aggravated particularly from being Vietnamese: the helpless, needy people from the war the West lost -- “being ‘Vietnamese’ had all these loaded connotations in their home countries, and had set immigrant parents and their children on a path of never being able to (fully) belong in their home countries, despite their best efforts to integrate, and in spite of their socio-economic achievements. There, they would always be seen and treated as ‘foreigners’” (Koh, 2018, p. 120). These ‘forever foreigners’, as Koh put it, could have developed a motivation countering the antagonism to the ancestral homeland based on the anti-communism politics (Koh, 2018, p. 120). Facing such difficulties of being racial minorities, they may feel the need for connection with origin countries wherein they are members of the racial majority (Levitt & Waters, 2002). The marginalized social position as refugees and descendants of refugees can prompt a need to maintain attachment with or seek out a connection with roots (Barnes, 2001; Louie, 2001).

The motivation to ‘stay Vietnamese’ manifests for example through place-making and community-building, as happened in major Vietnamese hubs in the United States (Aguilar-San Juan, 2009). The preservation of ancestral homeland language, culture, and family norms also serves to maintain the connection. In terms of family, however, the prototypical Vietnamese-American diaspora community’s familial dynamics have been termed a “tightrope” (Kibria, 1995), and more recently an “extended family tightrope” encompassing transnational family dynamics (Nguyen-Akbar, 2014). Nguyen-Akbar describes a “dichotomous rivalry between individuality and their perceived ideas about collectivism and Vietnamese family survival strategies after refugee resettlement” (p. 8). The initial migration experience transformed notions of family: the more traditional Confucian models placing the collective well-being of the family at the center, and emphasizing hierarchy and patriarchy (Bélanger & Barbieri, 2009), gave way somewhat to Western-style emphasis on individualism and more egalitarian relationships between older and younger family members and between males and females (Kibria, 1995; Nguyen-Akbar, 2014).

Given the trauma they experienced, it is understandable that the first generation tended to discourage ideas about return among the offspring (Nguyen-Akbar, 2016; Zhou, 2001). To them, Resolution 36’s all-encompassing common identity declaration may even have seemed threatening, something which would undermine the anti-communist identity in the diaspora, weakening the remembrance of their history and suffering (Valverde, 2008). Among this first generation, and even into the 1.5 generation and the second generation among some of those imprinted with first generation’s trauma, real or imagined returns reinforce closure and a loss of linkage to the ancestral home (N. H. C. Nguyen, 2008). However, in many other cases the coming of age of the 1.5 generation at the same time as the emerging of the đổi mới-based policies saw them playing a key role in shaping willingness of refugee communities to engage with the homeland; along with the second generation, these younger generations have generally been more open to and even enthusiastic about making the diasporic return (S. Chan, 2006; Koh, 2015; Nguyen-Akbar, 2016).

As mentioned previously, from the point of view of the state, the Việt Kiều have gone from being seen solely through an adversarial lens as anti-communists to being welcomed for their technical and professional skills, family remittances, or investment capital (Long, 2004). The term *Việt Kiều* itself, which took on derogatory connotations in the immediate post-War period, was reformed alongside đổi mới to its pre-War favored state of esteem (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011; Koh, 2015; Long, 2004; Nguyen-Akbar, 2016). In addition to *Việt Kiều*, the more intimate term *Kiều Bảo* came to be used in official discourse as well, meaning ‘people of the same blood origin’ (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011, p. 1105), or as Valverde (2008) translates it, ‘people coming from the same womb’ (p. 50). Indeed, the state has taken deliberate measures to galvanize the Vietnamese identity and promote sentimental longing for the ‘homeland’, perhaps to achieve a patriotic ‘imagined community’ that takes Vietnamese nationalism beyond the bounds of the nation (B. Anderson, 2006). As Koh expresses, “the central message implicit in contemporary state discourse is that overseas Vietnamese remain essentially Vietnamese wherever they are, regardless of when they left the country, or for that matter, whether or not they were born in Vietnam” (Koh, 2015, p. 184).

The state’s efforts to foster a sense of home, closeness, and belonging to Vietnam served to allow it to move past its history of past criticisms of those who fled and to promote more active engagement with Vietnamese overseas (Stern, 1992). The ‘Vietnamese’ identity in the ‘transnational pan-Vietnamese imagination’ (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011) becomes easier for wider portions of the diaspora to claim. In fact, Chan describes the improved outlook for the ethnically Chinese among the Việt kiều upon return as compared to their initial condition before emigration as ‘identity laundering’ (Y. W. Chan, 2013).

The evolving sense of self among the later generations of Việt Kiều -- one that breaks with the traditional political ideologies of the past -- hence converges with the Vietnamese state and local population’s own goals for ‘progress’ and being ‘modern’, ‘developed’, or ‘advanced’, which align with what the Việt Kiều represent (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011). In addition to the Vietnamese state’s official attempts to create a welcoming environment, the local society is also welcoming. Variations and gaps persist, however. For example, local people consider there to be key cultural differences with the Việt Kiều who are ‘Westernized’ -- in some cases they feel that this manifests as ‘arrogance’; still, there is a sense that the ‘modern’ ideas from the ‘developed’ countries will contribute to progress locally and the gap will continue to narrow, and overall, there is locally a positive attitude towards Việt Kiều in the society (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011).

For their part, the returning Việt Kiều do so as a result of a confluence of factors. Among those later generations that return, intrinsic factors include a “profound sense of not belonging in their home countries; the search for identity and need to understand their historical past(s); and the quest for adventure and meaning. Extrinsic factors relate to specific features in Vietnam’s socio-economic and cultural landscape that make it appealing for this generation of Việt Kiều to migrate there” (Koh, 2018, p. 117).

As mentioned previously, the sense of ‘not belonging’ therefore spans generations in the immigrant experience and forms during the premigration life of second-generation Việt Kiều return migrants. In fact, Koh describes the return migration as an act that also creates a transnational racial safety zone, much as the *Little Saigons* do among the overseas communities. Koh also finds that for many, the return is a kind of ‘existential migration’, and a process of ‘self-building’ (Koh, 2018; Madison, 2006; Tulgan, 1997). Barber (2017) suggests that real or imagined return visits provide ethnic authentification opportunities for second-generation British Vietnamese, useful for them as ‘diasporic cultural capital’ to claim a stronger sense of belonging and ethnic authenticity, akin to Espiritu and Tran's (2002) observations on transnational imaginings among the second-generation in a Vietnamese-American community.

Nguyen-Akbar (2016) describes the return migrants’ “desire to get away from what they perceived as mundane and predictable lives in their home countries” (p. 101); in doing so many are exercising a kind of privilege, since they have a choice to stay, go, return (and repeat) -- a borderless cosmopolitanism, or ‘flexible citizenship’ (Ong, 1999). Furthermore, in the transnational lives they embark upon when they return to Vietnam, the Việt Kiều bring a sense of optimism and hopes for doing something meaningful -- the notion of wanting to ‘contribute to the homeland’ or ‘finding purpose’ comes out strongly in the narratives of numerous returnees (Koh, 2015, 2018; Nguyen-Akbar, 2016). In fact, returnees not displaying this trait are often criticized as being ‘inauthentic’ (Nguyen-Akbar, 2017). Other push and pull factors described by Koh and Nguyen-Akbar include economic opportunities (e.g., the 2008 economic recession in the United States, and growing economic opportunities in Vietnam).

**Post-return migration experiences and identity construction**

Nearly all literature on the sense of identity among returning Việt Kiều acknowledges the notion of ‘neither here nor there’. Mary Yee writes “Not belonging is the diasporic experience of the immigrant” (Yee, 2020, p. 1), drawing on work on the transnational family experience (Christou, 2011; Skrbis, 2008), and this seems this applies to the second-generation returnees as well. They *cannot* fully reintegrate, but they also *do not want to*, perhaps wanting the ‘best of both worlds’, following on Ong’s notion of flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999). Culturally, their hybrid Westernized lifestyles and worldviews can predispose them to be critical and not fully accepting of the home country society and culture: “Some Việt kiều dislike the fact that their relatives in Vietnam often expect money and gifts from them, and found it necessary to resist the Vietnamese style of ‘familism’ which invades their privacy. They are also critical of ‘local’ ways and habits, ranging from the way that the Vietnamese drive and their lack of motivation and creativity in the workplace, to the low level of cleanliness in eating places, homogenous sociality and official corruption” (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011, pp. 1108-9).

The experience of difficulty assimilating is a central tenet of migration studies, including return migration (Dumon, 1986)*,* but the returning Việt Kiều (particularly second generation from the West) also actively resist full assimilation. Returnees value their boundaries and guard their own ‘cultural territory’, finding it an important aspect of their own sense of identity to resist collectivism, maintain individuality and retain elements of Western culture even at ‘home’ (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011). Maintenance of active transnational ties is a common feature of the Vietnamese return migrant experience (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011; Koh, 2015, 2018; Müller, 2021; Nguyen-Akbar, 2014, 2016, 2017; Yee, 2020). Rather than truly ‘home’, perhaps those that stay in Vietnam for extended durations consider it ‘home for-now’ (Koh, 2015). The independent sense of self conjures parallels to Tsuda's (2003) notion of the ‘counter-identity’ among Brazilian-Japanese ethnic returnees to Japan. However, the Việt Kiều returnees’ desire to keep with their own unique Western upbringings and refusal to fully adopt all the local habits does not mean they would want to flaunt this as a counter-identity, rather wishing to avoid seeming arrogant (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011), or drawing attention to class differences (Nguyen-Akbar, 2014).

The challenges that returnees face both from the limitations of the state’s policies as well as the cultural differences, combined with their privilege of flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999), can keep them in a state of being one-foot-in-one-foot-out of their home-for-now (Koh, 2015), feeling neither entirely local nor completely foreign (Nguyen-Akbar, 2017), with an unfixed sense of self (Y. W. Chan & Tran, 2011), experiencing both moments of belongingness and connection as well as alienation and confusion (Müller, 2021). Nguyen-Akbar (2016) suggests that the returnees’ transnational practices are not merely a byproduct of their difficulties or from a sense of caution, but actually part of their process of identity construction and transnational sense of belonging -- being cosmopolitan or transnational *is* the identity.

But there is a wide range of possible identities: “Việt Kiều return migrants construct and transgress boundaries of space and moral distinctions in their pursuit of belonging. As return migrants of the 1.5 and second generation, Việt Kiều neither experience a seamless transition into local Vietnamese culture and society nor do they exist entirely in a transnational urbanized world disconnected from local place making. Rather, they draw upon multiple forms of social and cultural capital to negotiate a third space in between the local and global” (Nguyen-Akbar, 2017). Identity demonstrations being not just about *who one is*, but also *who one isn’t*, Nguyen-Akbar (2017) argues that returnees create distinguishing boundaries as part of their identity construction: symbolic boundaries distinguishing themselves from foreigners, and ethno-national boundaries distinguishing themselves from locals; however, they also cross such boundaries to find in-between spaces of belonging in Vietnam.

On one end of the spectrum, for some returnees, the struggle with identity construction accentuates the differences between them the locals, and results in a reinforced, heightened sense of their Western identity. On the other end, some returnees experience fulfilment of their search for belongingness, ultimately closing the loop on the diaspora journey.

**Gender dimension in Việt Kiều return**

As mentioned previously, among the diaspora in Western countries, the familial dynamics have diverged somewhat from traditional Asian norms surrounding patriarchy towards more Western-style egalitarian customs between males and females (Kibria, 1995). That the same shift is not necessarily reflected within Vietnam adds a gender dimension to the returnee experience and identity construction. Transnationalism can create a disjuncture for women between Western notions of gender equality and their more traditional positioning in the origin country (Ong 1999).

Nguyen-Akbar (2014) describes the case of a second-generation 25-yo female returnee facing “cultural expectations of being home by 10 P.M. as a young, unmarried female, and restrictions on her mobility to transport herself” -- there is a clear impact of this on identity construction, as the returnee puts it: “*I’m not even Vietnamese in that kind of way*” (p. 16). Similarly, Müller (2021) finds that reports of negative experiences among second-generation returnees come predominantly from young women for similar reasons of facing cultural restrictions on their freedom due to their gender, consequently feeling a loss of agency. Again, the impact on sense of belonging can be potentially severe, as one female return visitor expressed in frustration regarding the cultural tensions over gendered expectations in families: “*I have the feeling that I’ll never be a part of Vietnam. And I never want to be a part of it.*” (Müller, 2021, p. 27). To some extent, the restrictions on young women imposed by family could be mitigated by choosing to live on their own, which many returnees do (Nguyen-Akbar, 2017).

In contrast, Barber (2017) finds that actually returnee women were more deeply engaged in their returns, developing cultural competencies and linguistic skills and hence fulfilling gendered expectations of their role as ‘bearers of culture’ (Yuval-Davis, 1997); achieving this may have empowered their Vietnamese authenticity. Interestingly, Nguyen-Akbar (2016) relates another way in which the return experience poses an advantage to women compared to their situations in their pre-return (Western) homes: the cost of starting and raising a young family is relatively lower because it is inexpensive to hire a maid or nanny.

If the gendered narratives among women returnees are mixed, Müller (2021) finds more positive, comfortable, and nostalgic cultural experiences among returning men visitors, as one returnee put it, a “*feeling of coming back home to the family*” (Müller, 2021, p. 24). However, Barber's (2017) findings caution that returning men do not necessarily all get the sense of belongingness nor authentication of their Vietnamese identity after visiting Vietnam; the differential efforts made by the women and men, bolstered by the greater expectations placed upon women to engage culturally, could explain the different experiences. It is apparent that future analyses of identity construction among second-generation return migrants must include nuanced consideration of the gender dimension.

**Role of ICTs in the experiences of transnational migrants**

The extant literature specifically on the role of ICTs in facilitating belongingness and identity construction of transnational migrants has traditionally focused on how ICTs support the connection of diaspora communities and individuals back to the homeland identity as well as their integration into their host country societies; studies primarily refer to experiences of the first generation and to a lesser extent, the second generation and beyond (Cabalquinto, 2018; Candidatu et al., 2019; Cuban, 2017; Hiller & Franz, 2004; Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2021; Nedelcu, 2018; Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2020; Panagakos & Horst, 2006; Pesando et al., 2021; Williams Veazey, 2020).

The impact of ICTs is demonstrated at several phases of migration, both pre- and post (Hiller & Franz, 2004). Increasingly, studies on transnational migration and ICTs focus largely on the internet as the core technology of relevance, given its pervasive influence on nearly all social, political, and cultural issues (Pesando et al., 2021) -- for transnational studies, particular attention is on issues of community, identity, transcendence beyond nation-states, among others (Panagakos & Horst, 2006). Certainly, the field has moved well-beyond the initial frameworks of enhanced connectivity offered by ethnic diasporic mass media and ever-cheaper international phone services. The historical context is well-reviewed in Kozachenko (2013).

Most studies point to a catalyzing influence of ICTs on transnational communication, migrant community building, home-country belongingness (‘home away from home’), and host-country integration (recent examples include Cabalquinto, 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014a; Gough & Gough, 2019; Hillyer, 2021; Ihejirika & Krtalic, 2021; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2021; Pesando et al., 2021). Wenjing (2005) showed how virtual communities among the Chinese diaspora in North America (messaging boards or “BBSs”) supported their connection to the homeland, enabling a strong identification with China and independence from western values; at the same time the virtual communities facilitated their exposure and even adaptation to western society (Wenjing, 2005). González and Castro (2007) investigated the role of community-specific websites in facilitating diasporic linkages to homeland communities for Mexican migrants in the United States. These transnational communities, facing dual realities with quotidian concerns in both their settled areas and originating hometowns, benefited from Mexican community websites through their presence functions as well as their service as communicative fora. Studies on Romanian migrants likewise reinforce the concept of ICT-mediated transnational practices serving contrasting purposes and reflecting dialogical social realities, at once enhancing a sense of homeland belonging in a deterritorialized manner -- preserving particularities and reinforcing cultures -- while also accelerating host society integration (Nedelcu, 2016). It is unsurprising that the well-known dual-frame of reference, or ‘in-betweenness’, maintained by migrants would be amplified by ICTs along both axes.

Karim (2003) discussed how transnational migrants’ technology adoption was often ahead of the curve, due to the special challenges they face in communicating and reaching audiences; the same is demonstrated by Codagnone and Kluzer (2011). But the contribution of various technologies -- e.g., digital and satellite ethnic media, the Internet, and mobile phone communications -- is recognized increasingly as not only being remarkable for identity construction in migration, but more generally as inextricable from the globalized daily lives of most people, migrant or otherwise; hence, a cosmopolitan perspective may be apt (Nedelcu, 2013). Indeed, the kind of “corporeal telecopresence” (electronic proximity) as classified by Zhao (2003), with fairly robust embodiments such as facial expressions, gestures, and postures, as well as features of strong immediacy and mobility, is a global reality, with de facto intense, online sociability being a norm for most of the world. Ironically, in the COVID19 pandemic era of ‘social distancing’, ubiquitous online copresence is the new normal for large swaths of the world’s population, and this only is expected to intensify (J. Anderson et al., 2021). The subsequent increasing hybridization of cultures, sometimes seen as homogenization in a western mold, drives a perspective that perhaps ‘we are all migrants’ (Pieterse, 2019).

But coming back to the actual transnational migrant experience, online social media in particular has undoubtedly altered the migrant communication landscape: enhancing the frequency and richness of community and home-country communication, helping consolidate weak ties and even activate latent ties that provide valuable practical information and access to resources, and creating democratized informal channels of streetwise knowledge (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Dekker and Engberson (2014) showed that in line with migration network theory, online social networks provide a viable alternative to traditional migration networks that may not yet be well established among some communities, such as Brazilian and Ukrainian migrants to the Netherlands. Among migrant communities in New Zealand, Ihejirika and Krtalic (2021) show that social media plays an enabling role in multiple phases of migration: in the transitioning phase mostly for supporting the decision to move; in the settling phase, for mitigating anxieties making informed settlement decisions; in the settled phase, for facilitating connectivity with family and friends in the home country. The cumulating social capital through the online experience could even lower the threshold to migration and become the main force driving some migration, ala Massey’s ‘cumulative causation’ phenomenon (Massey et al., 1999); at the least, the internet is an enabler (Pesando et al., 2021; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2016).

The combination of the internet, smartphones, and social media has fostered the emergence of this new social reality of ubiquitous connectivity. This kind of co-presence, wherein people are widely rendered mutually accessible for contact in a kind of ubiquitous social connectivity, once felt to be obstructed more by social barriers than technological barriers (Zhao & Elesh, 2008), is no longer a distant possibility: Diminescu’s “connected migrants” now commonly activate their remote relations daily (Diminescu, 2008). In the realm of ‘doing family’ processes, notions of ‘ICT-based co-presence’ have become increasingly refined lenses to consider the transnational migrant experience (Baldassar et al., 2016). Intensive use of ICTs contributes to strengthening ties and intensified circulation of cultural, emotional, economic, and social resources within transnational families (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Likewise, the ICT-mediated enhancement of migrant engagement in the conduct of business and other social, political, and cultural realms is increasingly well-documented (Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012).

The prevalence of ICTs has certainly driven a shift away from thinking of migrants first and foremost as “uprooted” persons, rather emphasizing their mobilization and ‘presence at a distance’ (Diminescu, 2012). Candidatu et al. (2019) however caution against the tendency to champion the agency of digital diasporas and the enabling affordances of ICTs, since digitality and reality are connected and ICTs can still carry the same offline power dynamics of gender, race, ethnicity, and class -- a struggling refugee technologically empowered with a smartphone is still a struggling refugee: “digital diaspora cannot be understood out-side of its offline environment and materiality, still marked by gendered, racial, classed, generational, and geopolitical power relations” (Candidatu et al., 2019, p. 43). However, refugees and asylum seekers have been found to benefit from ICTs, e.g., smartphones and social media, which help them overcome information precarity and maintain their transnational connections (Şanlıer Yüksel, 2020).

**ICTs and return migration**

Clearly, ICTs and particularly social media facilitate migration (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014), but what about return migration? Literature on the role of ICTs and in return migration is relatively scarce. Often, it is the “return” of technology itself that is the focus, i.e., how return migrants and transnational diaspora networks support technology transfer and improvement back to their origin countries in a type of “brain gain back” or “brain circulation”; the technology aspect is relevant insofar as it is often ICT-based industries that are being strengthened or established by return migrants who are ICT specialists, as in the Indian ICT sector (Gelb & Krishnan, 2018).

Some studies emphasize the role of ICTs in bridging the information gap -- perhaps supporting ‘return preparedness’ as per the concept of (Cassarino, 2004). Just as the improved access to a variety of sources of information catalyzes migration, it should lower barriers to return migration as well -- the return is itself another migration, after all. An aspect of preparedness that ICTs can help with is through an extension of the strengthened familial communication channels and financial transfers: migrants can be more readily involved in micromanaging their remittances such that their place in the family and home community is already clarified and cemented in advance of the return (Hunter, 2018). Maintenance of transnational family social networks, especially daily social relations, is positively associated with the likelihood of return migration of first-generation Asian migrants and their children (Salaff & Greve, 2013). It stands to reason that ICTs enabling the kind of copresence important for maintaining transnational social networks should therefore facilitate return migration, though a direct exploration of this is still lacking in the literature.

At the national level, countries eager to attract return migrants with valuable international work experiences gladly help fill the information gap through their own outreach efforts to engage diaspora populations and create knowledge networks -- India, China, and Singapore have been quite active in this regard (Goel, 2020). However, in the case of social media, the risk exists that diaspora narratives may be controlled by powerful actors and online social network engineering that filter out or dampen a richer variety of voices. For example, in the case of the Rwandan refugee diaspora repatriation debate, Facebook-based online networks tend to paint a rosy picture of Rwandan national unity, adopting the government’s framing, maintaining a meta-narrative of unification and discouraging alternative voices; the result is a potentially artificial construct that leaves little space for those questioning return migration, successful as it may be in promoting return (Kok & Rogers, 2019).

Rather than seeing return as a discrete event with a defined before and after, virtual transnational diaspora communities and networks provide a potential framework for more encompassing analysis. The return is rather conceptualized within the ever-evolving transnational experience of more and more people and even the broader transnationalization of whole societies, often deeply imbricated with virtual copresence ala the concept of ‘digital diaspora’ (Nedelcu, 2018). Lei and Guo's (2020) work on the experiences of Chinese transnational academics “returnees” concluded that there exists a continuum of ways of being and belonging even after return that transcends national boundaries, hence the idea of reformulating returnee identity rather as another facet of “transnational diaspora”, one with features of simultaneity (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) and multiple embeddedness (Schiller & Çağlar, 2013); some returnees in fact expressed more cosmopolitan self-identities. Virtual spaces catalyzed and enabled the transnational connections, diasporic belongingness, and in the case of the Chinese academics, inter-dependence across borders (Lei & Guo, 2020). The concept of transnational diaspora, particularly as enabled by ever more advanced ICTs facilitating increasingly robust copresence, certainly answers the call to move beyond methodological nationalism (Schiller & Çağlar, 2013; Wimmer & Schiller, 2003).

Although by definition they are focused on the experiences of returnees, return migration studies are well-suited to the transnational lens in the modern era, with ICTs generating the rich borderless public spheres connecting migrant and nonmigrant populations. Lei and Guo (2020) showed that the overseas Chinese knowledge diaspora even connected virtually with China-based Chinese academics, one aspect of the “bridging” function performed by returnees. Nedelcu (2019) demonstrated similar connections in the networks of Romanian scholars abroad and how the connections facilitated impacts within Romania: the scientific “e-diaspora”, though a deterritorialized network, functioned as a transnational actor, enabling local change in Romanian civil society. ICTs have also been shown to support transnational diaspora entrepreneurship by facilitating resource pooling, connecting small local economies in origin countries to the global economy, and making funds transfers affordable and reliable; the diaspora community members bring new entrepreneurial ventures to their origin countries whether they themselves physically return or not (Achtenhagen et al., 2015). Such experiences, facilitated by ICTs, even challenge the traditional physical return paradigm to some extent, since they potentially obviate a need for physical return to countries of recent or ancestral origin for the purpose of contributing to reverse brain drain or otherwise leveraging the wider exposure gained by migrants that went out and their descendants born in the countries of settlement.

It is increasingly apparent that the internet is indispensable during the initial inspiration phase of the migration journey (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2016). Vathi (2015) posited that even barring adequate intergenerational transmission of ethnic return motivations, the second generation in Albanian diaspora communities could be empowered by the internet to be independent actors in the establishment of ties to the homeland. Indeed, for the second generation and beyond, ICTs, especially social media, are important for building *bridging* social capital, an important aspect of inspiration for return, especially among second-generation returnees. Turkish return migrants from the Netherlands to Turkey use Internet and other media for bonding purposes, i.e., maintaining connections with family and friends back in the Netherlands, and for bridging purposes, i.e., establishing new connections in Turkey (Ogan & Ozakca, 2009).

Appropriate social media presence and engagement has even been highlighted as a recommended practice for governments seeking to attract skilled young Intra-EU returnees (Hahn-Schaur et al., 2019). Social media has also been found useful for driving second-generation return visits from Europe to Ghana for charitable engagements and other diaspora-led development projects (Akom Ankobrey et al., 2021).

**Second-generation return, ICTs, identity and belongingness**

In her study on Greek-American second-generation return, Christou (2006) related the importance of networks in the return process, including ‘imagined communities of cybernetworks’:

*“returnees as social actors with access to information technology ‘construct an imaginary world dominated by the visual signifiers of Hellenic personal/national identity: the mediascapes and ideoscapes of Hellenism in postmodernity’ (Hamilakis, 2000, p. 254). Such digital ethnoscapes indicate that ‘the projection of personal/national identities in cyberspace is often grounded on the same essentialist and exclusivist notions which are central to the national dream and imagination’ (Hamilakis, 2000, p. 258). This type of imaginative heterotopia (Leontis, 1995) creates a utopian space of a representation of an ‘authentic’ homeland through migrant social and cultural constructions that extends beyond territorial boundaries but is nevertheless a cultural spatial configuration of an idealized ancestral homeland.”* (p. 227).

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