

Review of Phi Su's The Border Within Vietnamese Migrants Transforming Ethnic Nationalism in Berlin, Stanford Press, 2022, pp. 226, hardcover ISBN: 9781503630062 (\$90), paperback ISBN: 9781503630147 (\$28), ebook ISBN: 9781503630154 (\$28)

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The field of postcolonial studies has long been concerned with issues of cultural hybridity, national belonging, and political sovereignty. Phi Hong Su's *The Border Within: Vietnamese Migrants Transforming Ethnic Nationalism in Berlin* tackles all these weighty matters with a remarkable deftness that bridges divergent interests in decolonization, global migration, with the Cold War. Through richly narrated interviews, the ethnography

focuses on Vietnamese migrants in Berlin, a city once split into a “democratic” West Berlin and “communist” East Berlin. On an intimate yet global scale, it traces the complicated interactions between (northern) economic migrants and (southern) postwar refugees after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Through survivors of the Second Indochina War, Su explores the ongoing ideological battle between a pro-West South Vietnam and a communist North Vietnam.

This groundbreaking sociological project begins with the author’s study abroad experience, where she compares the simple joy of meeting another Vietnamese person in Germany to the feeling of being part of a massive refugee community in the United States, where “Little Saigon” ethnic enclaves are highly visible. This spatial and cultural contrast sparks questions about how the geopolitical bifurcations of the Vietnam-American War did not end with the defeat of South by northern forces in 1975. Instead, the author finds that those homeland divisions were transported to places where migrants now live or work.

Introductory chapter 1 begins with the story of Tai, born in a time when Vietnam is under French colonial rule. When the French are defeated by Vietnamese anticolonial forces, this decolonial moment served as a prelude to a bigger fratricidal war in which ethnic Vietnamese fought with one another. Like many formerly colonized

nations in the Global South that fractured into warring territories, Vietnam split into irreconcilable sides, even though parts of it belonged to other Indigenous polities like the Cham. Su mines this complicated history to interpret the worldviews of her subjects in the field.

Post-reunification Vietnam under communist victors sent migrant laborers to eastern bloc territories to help with a labor shortage, while refugees from South Vietnam found sanctuary in West Berlin. Border crossers who come for work developed tense relations with anti-communist forced migrants that left after the collapse of the southern republic. Resettled asylum seekers like Tai encountered contract workers and, rather than develop feelings of national unity, experienced social divides. Potential cultural solidarity via shared ethnicity is broken (and heightened) by perceptions that the northern workers are criminal, cold, and low-class compared to the financially comfortable southern refugees who had benefitted from West Berlin's wealth and naturalization process.

Chapters 2 and 3 highlight identity construction with a battle over cultural authenticity and citizenship. Divergent notions of who is really "Vietnamese" fell into debates over who gets to represent the Vietnamese nation-state. Narratives of good patriotic "loyalists" and bad deceptive "traitors" were reproduced during and after the war. Each side fought to liberate all of Viet-

nam, and this war continues by other means. But the author explains how when the country split in 1954, many northerners fled as refugees to the south to escape communist persecution. Many so-called southerners originally hailed from the north. Under public discourses of friends and enemies, political labels bled into stereotypes that became migrants' frames of reference toward fellow ethnonationals in Germany. Contexts of exit from Vietnam and the reunification of Germany in 1989 influenced the reception of migrants and their community formation. Su explains how the communist internationalism and Third World solidarity by contract workers like Ngoc are contested by of refugees, who believe northerners are gangsters from a corrupt authoritarian regime. These prevailing tropes make it difficult for Germans to accept Vietnamese, but they also make it hard for Vietnamese to trust one another.

Chapters 4 and 5 speaks to divergent forms of cultural capital and community-building. Migrant belonging mapped onto Cold War networks and Vietnamese North/South regionalism. The notion of northerners as law breakers in Germany stems from the economic shock from the fall of the Berlin Wall. Marriage migrants like Lien recognizes a difference between her first and deceased (German) husband and second (Vietnamese) spouse. The sexism that her second lover carried over from Vietnam speaks to gender problems as they overlap the general sense of southerners as honest and mor-

al, closer to Germans. Refugee nationalism rears its head within birthdays, community events, and dinner parties, where the author and others are scrutinized about their allegiances.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the battles that take shape even in supposedly neutral religious places. The flying of the South Vietnamese flag at a Buddhist temple sparks heated arguments about the right to display political orientation. During the war, South Vietnam was ruled by a Catholic dictator who trampled on human freedom, but northern migrants to the South were perceived as the nationally faithless ones, since they come from a communist-ruled regime. One of the Su's informants, Hue, even turned away from her temple, disgusted by overt displays of southern pride. Attempts by nuns to mitigate conflict resulted in them being accused of catering to northern monied interests. The temple's space of worship remains segregated along geopolitical lines.

State formation is not defined by the boundaries of the nation-state. Instead, meanings of statehood and nationality are forged by the exchanges among co-ethnics and compatriots within and outside the homeland. As Su observes throughout the book, Vietnamese are not unique in the segmented construction of their imagined communities, since Cubans, Koreans, Scots, and Somalilanders are wandering citizens on a planet where borders do not capture the entangled life worlds of in-

ternational students, visa overstayers, expats, and the undocumented.

We continue to live in a postcolonial world, which pivots around the question of the colonizer and colonized, the powerful and the powerless, the insider and the outsider. With elegant prose and well-theorized empirical findings, this book is fully accessible to a wide reading audience and to scholars of various disciplines. *The Border Within* is a major text for anyone who wishes to grasp the social forces that delimit postcolonial and diasporic identities. Despite reunification, the decolonial moment for Vietnam never truly materialized, as everyday people in Vietnamese diaspora continue to fight for liberation and freedom in their own separate ways. This important study reveals how nations are made, unmade, and remade with an understanding that the path to independence and freedom is riddled with endless controversy.