



# RETHINKING ASIAN MOBILITIES

## Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany

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**ABSTRACT:** Vietnam's economic reforms have generated much praise for the country's rapid "opening" of its markets, as if the Vietnamese nation had previously existed in a state of isolation, closed to broader global influences and exchanges. Such discourses overlook the importance of transnational circulations of people, goods, technologies, and expertise during the socialist era that were vital to Vietnam's postwar national reconstruction and continue to play a role in post-socialist economic transformation today. This article traces the socialist pathways of labor migration between Vietnam and the former Soviet Bloc (specifically, East Germany) in the 1980s, mobilities that are generally absent in studies of contemporary export labor industries. Based on multi-sited ethnographic and archival research, the author follows Vietnamese workers first to the East German factories where they labored as "contract workers," and then through their subsequent return and reintegration into Vietnamese society after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These mobilities bespeak of an alternative history and formation of diasporic communities that are little acknowledged or addressed in literature on labor migrations, and yet are important to understanding emerging forms of stratification today in Vietnam. Moreover, an analysis of early non-capitalist experiences with overseas labor regimes in the 1980s provides insights into contemporary Vietnamese governance practices that promote—rather uncritically, similar to other "emerging countries"—export labor as a nation-building strategy to reduce endemic poverty and develop a late socialist country.

Years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as Vietnam expanded its economic and geopolitical ties with countries once identified as the "capitalist

West,” it was not uncommon for first-time visitors to Hanoi to note with surprise the enduring presence of socialist relics and other traces of the cold war past on the capital city’s material, technological, and intellectual landscape. At times, older Vietnamese could be heard speaking fluent Hungarian, Polish, or German. In wintertime, Russian fur caps abound, while Czech beer and German sausages emerged as culinary delights. Out on the streets, Russian Minsk and Lada, and the occasional East German Simson motorbike, rode among new Hondas and Toyotas, hinting at a more complicated story of mobility and socioeconomic inequality that extends beyond the current period of trade liberalization (see fig. 1).

The presence of such artifacts gives reason to pause and rethink Vietnam’s state of isolation before its cautious “opening” and embrace of market capitalism. Rather, these socialist vestiges, which continue to play an important role in Vietnamese society today, attest to the oft-overlooked circulation of people, goods, knowledge, and capital between communist states before the collapse of the Soviet Union. I refer to these circulations as “socialist mobilities” in this essay. While socialism is commonly associated with a generalized condition of *immobility*, here I demonstrate that mobility was in fact key to the realization of socialist international ideology and to fostering the belief that global socialism offered the most desirable path to development and prosperity. Facilitated and yet regulated by the state, socialist mobilities bring our attention to other important forms of transnational movement across space and time, such as circuits of labor migration between Vietnam and fraternal socialist countries during the cold war—the subject of this essay. Such circulations reveal an alternative history and formation of diasporic communities that are little acknowledged or addressed in literature on Asian mobilities. Yet, they are important to understanding shifts in forms of socioeconomic stratification in Vietnam today. Moreover, an analysis of early experiences with overseas work contracts in the 1980s in the context of East Germany (GDR, or German Democratic Republic) provides insights into contemporary, post-reform governance practices that promote, rather uncritically, export labor as a neoliberal strategy to reduce endemic poverty and develop the country economically.

### Transnationalizing Vietnamese Mobilities

In recent years, Vietnam has seen a rapid escalation in the number of young men and women who are sent abroad to work, particularly to East Asian destinations such as Taiwan and South Korea. According to the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (Molisa), by the end of 2012, over 500,000 Vietnamese were working in more than forty countries.<sup>1</sup> Because these mostly low-skilled workers send home remittances that total more than US\$1.6 billion an-

1. Despite the global financial crisis, the number of overseas workers has climbed consistently in recent years: from 75,000 in 2009 to more than 85,000 in 2010, and then peaking in 2011 with 88,000 before a decrease to 80,000 in 2012 on account of political turmoil abroad (e.g., in Libya) and contacts terminated by South Korea in response to a growing number of workers who “bo tron” or skip out on their contracts and reside abroad illegally. For statistics, see the Department of Overseas Labor Management (Dolab) at [dolab.gov.vn/index.aspx](http://dolab.gov.vn/index.aspx).



Fig. 1. GDR Simson S51 motorbike, Hanoi, 2014. (Pham Phuong Chi)

nually, the Vietnamese government considers the exportation of labor vital to the project of viable and sustainable nation-building: generating new jobs, increasing both household income and flows of foreign currency, and strengthening relationships with cooperating countries.<sup>2</sup> And while Vietnamese researchers have noted that labor migration outflows have indeed had a “profound impact on the reduction of poverty and unemployment” in Vietnam,<sup>3</sup> the extent to which an export labor system under global capitalism can effectively decrease poverty over the long term, or might only be a temporary panacea, has yet to be determined.

Such uncertainties aside, the Vietnamese government has identified overseas labor contracts as essential to its national strategy of *xoa doi giam ngheo* (eradicating hunger and reducing poverty). Decision 71/2009/QĐ-TTg, approved in April 2009, stipulates that ten thousand workers sent abroad each year must come from designated “poor districts,” including areas with large ethnic minority populations. In the 2009–10 “Program to Support Poor Districts through Export Labor to Attain Sustainable Poverty Reduction,” agency recruitment fees for training and traveling were subsidized by Molisa or waived for non-Kinh (Viet) minorities. Vietnamese researchers who confirm that the majority of labor migrants today come from impoverished backgrounds view government efforts to extend overseas work opportunities to underprivileged citizens as be-

2. Hong Thuy 2007, 6.

3. Tran et al. 2010, 18.

ing largely successful.<sup>4</sup> Such demographics can be visually affirmed by the large groups of workers at international airports in Vietnam, where young men and women are easy to spot in their matching T-shirts and caps, upon which is printed the logo of the Vietnamese labor agency that negotiated their contracts. Most are traveling abroad for the first time; they often come from rural districts, and—especially for young women—have never been away from home.

Remarkably, there are few sustained, ethnographic studies of these contemporary transnational labor mobilities, in contrast to the wealth of scholarship on Southeast Asian labor migration elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Though this is slowly changing, studies of Vietnamese migrant workers typically focus on internal rather than international migration, for example, rural to urban relocation to seek employment in flourishing cities.<sup>6</sup> This is not to argue that scholarship on Vietnamese mobilities fails to adequately attend to the transnational in its scope and analysis. Two critical and carefully researched fields are worth mentioning: the recent phenomenon of “marriage migrants,”<sup>7</sup> and studies of cold war refugees and diasporic communities that subsequently formed in the West.<sup>8</sup> Yet, even in these important bodies of work, pathways of migration that decenter the capitalist West are largely overlooked, if not altogether unknown.<sup>9</sup> A focus on socialist mobilities thus broadens the scope to include other cold war migration histories under the broader rubric of “transnational Vietnam.” These circulations of people and goods were not an earlier but a concurrent wave of cold war mobility tied to specific historical and geopolitical conditions of socialist—rather than capitalist—globalization. (In official discourse this mobility is often termed “socialist internationalism.”) Moreover, these transnational movements—for the purpose of work, study, diplomacy, and cultural/intellectual exchange—led to the formation of vibrant migrant communities in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that continue to maintain close economic and social ties to the Vietnamese nation-state. In this article, I highlight the important role these “socialist pathways of migration”<sup>10</sup> played, first, in postwar Vietnam during the subsidy era of national reconstruction, and second, in the foundation laid to build a post-reform export labor industry today. In tracing the out-migration of contract workers in the 1980s to East Germany and their return after the end of the cold war, I show how export labor as a solution to endemic poverty is at best a dubious policy.

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4. Ngoc 2011.

5. Much of this literature examines women’s mobilities and their work in affective labor industries, such as domestic care, nursing, or sex work; Boris and Parreñas (2010) call these “intimate labor” practices. See also Parreñas 2001, 2011; Constable 2007; Piper 2007; Oishi 2005; Lindquist 2008; and Ong 2006.

6. See, for example, Nguyen 2012 (Doing); Hoang 2011; Luong 2009.

7. Such as Bélanger and Tran 2011; Thai 2008; and Wang 2007.

8. Much of this literature is focused on the United States, which has the largest diasporic population of Vietnamese. See, most notably and recently, Valverde 2012; Nguyen 2012 (Gift).

9. For exceptions, see Hüwelmeier 2011, 2013; Baláz and Williams 2007; Williams and Baláz 2005; Bui 2003; Hardy 2002; Bayly 2004, 2007; Beresford and Phong 2000.

10. Hüwelmeier 2013.

## Vietnamese Postwar Labor Mobilities

The reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam has long been seen as an attractive source of labor for wealthier industrialized (and, in some cases, industrializing) countries. In the 1980s, close to 300,000 mostly unskilled workers were sent abroad to work in Communist Bloc countries, including the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany.<sup>11</sup> As I describe below, this cold war–era wave of labor migration provided valuable material remittances for impoverished families struggling to survive the postwar subsidy economy. For the state, moneys acquired through bilateral agreements with “socialist friends” went toward national reconstruction and to paying off debts. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought this flow of labor to an abrupt halt. During the 1990s, export labor opportunities gradually shifted to East Asian countries, though the number of overseas workers in this decade decreased significantly—to less than 88,000—because of the Asian Financial Crisis and the cautious expansion of the market in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

In public and academic discourse, the current surge in Vietnamese labor migration is often traced back to the early 2000s when export labor laws in Vietnam liberalized, reorienting the country toward new labor markets in East and Southeast Asia, and as well as Australia, Europe, and North America, including the United States.<sup>13</sup> According to Molisa, between 2001 and 2005, more than 295,000 workers traveled abroad on labor contracts. In 2005 alone, the number of contracts totaled more than 70,000—a whopping 80 percent of the total number of contracts in the 1990s. As the number of overseas workers increased, so too did the stories of fraud, breeches of contract, and violations of rights. A revised and expanded legal infrastructure for regulating the recruitment and transborder movement of Vietnamese labor was subsequently established in November 2006 when the National Assembly approved the first comprehensive Law on Vietnamese Overseas Contract Workers.<sup>14</sup>

Over the past decade, this burgeoning export labor industry has received much attention in Vietnam’s mass media, which has been quick to sensationalize both the risks and benefits involved. Here, the two sides to economic globalization—its promises and failures—are juxtaposed. On the one hand, overseas labor is associated with other—oftentimes involuntary—global migratory trends that make the headlines, such as the “selling” of Vietnamese brides to foreigners and the cross-border trafficking of women lured by promises of lucrative overseas employment. Stories of abuse and sexual exploitation, especially of women working as foreign maids, have been common fare in the press, as well as tales of extortionist fees paid by poor families to recruitment

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11. Tran et. al. 2010, 21. Semi-skilled laborers were also sent to work in Libya and Iraq in the 1980s. Additionally, more than 7,000 experts in the fields of health and education went to work in Africa. (Ibid.)

12. Ibid.

13. Taiwan is currently Vietnam’s largest export labor market, followed by Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, and Japan.

14. *Luật nguoì lao động Viet Nam đi lam o nuoc ngoai theo hop đồng* [Law on Vietnamese overseas contract workers] 2006.

firms, some of which turn out to be “ghost” agencies.<sup>15</sup> Political turmoil, such as in Libya in 2011, also resulted in the evacuation of thousands of unpaid workers who had been the target of inclusion in export labor programs and were sent back to Vietnam to face unemployment and large debts that further impoverished their families. Yet for many, the desire for a good income and a better quality of life has outweighed the potential risks. Workers have been lured by high wages as recounted in the press; for example, up to US\$4,000 monthly on the “golden island” of Brunei.<sup>16</sup> Success stories and images of newfound prosperity, with families—and, in some cases, entire villages—rising out of poverty, are represented by images of large, newly built brick housing.<sup>17</sup> Still, money is also shown to corrupt, and women who leave home to work abroad, the media forewarns, often return to find their families destroyed by gambling, crime, and drugs.<sup>18</sup>

Such spectacular stories aside, these reports commonly disregard the history of socialist-era labor migration that provided the policy foundations and economic expectations of this more recent export industry. And while there are indeed new facets to Vietnam’s post-reform regime of labor exportation—such as the founding of recruitment agencies,<sup>19</sup> the institutionalized payment of fees,<sup>20</sup> and an increased number of destinations overseas—an emphasis on “newness” elides a much longer transnational history of mobility that continues to underpin contemporary circulations between “home” and “abroad.” In this essay, I focus on labor migration to East Germany in the 1980s to make two critical points about socialist mobilities. The first concerns dominant trends in Western public and academic discourse about Vietnamese society. The transformation from a centrally planned economy to a competitive, mixed market regime (“market socialism”) is often framed in dichotomous terms that suggest a trajectory of progress and rupture from the past: from *isolation* to *integration*; *closure* to *opening*; *stasis* to *development*. These oppositions contrast an era of presumed socialist immobility, inwardness and constraint to one of capitalist mobility, externality, newness, and release.<sup>21</sup> There are obvious problems with this teleology that not only ignores continuities between past and present economic and sociocultural practices, as Ann Marie Leshkovich and I argued in our analysis of neoliberalism in Vietnam,<sup>22</sup> but also cultivates an image of Viet-

15. In 2012, investigative reporting by the newspaper *Tuoi tre* [Youth] helped to shut down a program to send workers to Portugal after recruitment fees of US\$1,800 skyrocketed to \$8,000. See [m.tuoiitre.vn/news/lt?id=499895](http://m.tuoiitre.vn/news/lt?id=499895) (accessed 20 February 2013). See also Hoang 2005 on ghost agencies and their extortion of more than US\$100,00 from potential recruits.

16. Anh Phuong 2003.

17. Van 2007.

18. Pham 2006.

19. According to Dolab, as of 2009, 164 enterprises were officially registered to provide overseas employment services, though many more operate unofficially. See [dolab.gov.vn/index.aspx?mid=1156&nid=1452&sid=11](http://dolab.gov.vn/index.aspx?mid=1156&nid=1452&sid=11) (accessed 22 February 2012).

20. According to the 2006 law, recruitment agencies can charge recruits a service fee equal to one month’s salary per contract year, in addition to airfare and visa and training costs.

21. Gibson-Graham 1996.

22. Including the role of market practices, both licit and illicit, under socialism. Schwenkel and

nam as timeless and unchanging, turning the country and its people into a “living museum.”<sup>23</sup> Because this teleological narrative privileges capitalism and relations with the West as a marker of geopolitical legitimacy and membership in the “global community,” it omits critical transnational circulations (of goods, expertise, human capital, technologies, etc.) during the socialist era that were vital to postwar national recovery and to the global networks and trade practices that have contributed to economic growth today.

The second critical point in this essay concerns gaps in the historical and ethnographic record. Modern Vietnamese history is typically partitioned into disparate and discontinuous eras marked by abrupt, transitional moments of global engagement (French colonialism and American occupation), total disengagement (postwar isolation) and then reengagement (return of global capitalism). Such paradigms, however, overlook shifts and continuities in socialist orientations and interconnections that were also global in scope and practice. In so doing, they have inadvertently silenced the voices of “socialist cosmopolitans,”<sup>24</sup> people with transnational connectivities that were profoundly meaningful materially, socially, and affectively. That these histories, and the subsequent migrant communities they spawned, are relegated to the fringe in scholarship on the Vietnamese diaspora raises important questions about the marginalization of particular migrant voices and experiences. One of my goals here is to bring these neglected histories into the purview of Vietnamese Studies in and beyond Vietnam, as well as to broaden the spatial and temporal scope of research on Asian mobilities. To do this, I draw on archival research carried out in Berlin and Hanoi, as well as extensive interviews with former contract workers from Vinh, Hanoi, and Hai Phong who worked in East Germany in the 1980s and, after the fall of the Wall, returned to Vietnam to face the prospect of capitalist *immobility*. I argue that attention to the lived experiences of socialist mobilities unsettles discourses of postwar isolation and the naturalized connections between capitalism and free movement (of people and commodities)—connections that rendered many returning labor migrants *less* economically and geographically mobile in the post-reform era. And yet for those who have been more successful after their return, attention to socialist mobilities allows for a deeper understanding of certain capitalist practices as a continuation, if not an expansion, of trade networks and commodity chains established under global socialism. In both cases, difficulties with social and economic integration after returning to Vietnam raise important questions about the promises of socialist–capitalist transformations, and, more importantly, about the government’s current reliance on export labor as a neoliberal development strategy to enable the country to achieve middle-income status.

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Leshkowich 2012, 384.

23. Thus invoking Johannes Fabian’s (1983) critique of the ethnographic Other as spatially and temporally distinct.

24. Hüwelmeier 2011; Bayly 2004.

## “Solidarity” and Mutual Aid Practices

Much historical scholarship has examined U.S. social and economic aid to post-war Europe and Asia, particularly to Japan and South Korea, to rebuild capitalist urban infrastructures and prevent the spread of communism. Lesser known are the rehabilitation programs within the non-capitalist world that sought to build global socialism through mutual aid practices and acts of “anti-imperial solidarity.” These forms of political, military, economic, and humanitarian aid, often glossed as “fraternal socialist assistance,” extend back to the multilateral reconstruction of war-ravaged North Korea.<sup>25</sup> Through massive public works projects, communist bloc countries publicly affirmed the principle of “solidarity in action” and in the process demonstrated internationally their support for the anticolonial revolutions unfolding in third world countries.

Although there were notable trends in the hierarchies that guided the directions of flows of such assistance, solidarity aid, as it was called, was not typically unilateral nor, in contrast with humanitarian practices today, always unidirectional. This is not to argue that socialist aid was free from power inequalities and paternalism. However, it was often the case that the receiving country was also concurrently a donor. For example, in the early 1960s, while fraternal countries assisted with North Korea’s recovery, North Korea was itself engaged in constructing the first prefabricated housing estate in Hanoi (*nha chung cu Kim Lien*). Likewise, while the beneficiary of extensive multilateral aid during and after the war, Vietnam sent thousands of *chuyen gia* (experts) to allied countries in Africa to train technicians and scientists.<sup>26</sup> Cuba and Vietnam also engaged in the exchange of medical knowledge and scientific expertise (and Cuba also participated in Vietnam’s reconstruction). These mutual aid practices both reaffirmed geopolitical membership in an international communist community and served to bolster a socialist vision of global humanity as rooted in ideologically persuasive notions of postcolonial solidarity.

Vietnam’s international relations with East Germany, as with other socialist countries, were marked by extensive multidirectional exchanges of people (students, experts, workers, cultural producers), technologies, commodities, and material resources. I have discussed elsewhere the types of humanitarian and other assistance that the GDR extended to Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s under the banner *Solidarität hilft siegen* (Solidarity brings victory), including the eight-year reconstruction of the demolished city of Vinh (see fig. 2).<sup>27</sup> What is crucial to recognize here is that beyond the 1970s, postwar socialist aid was increasingly multidirectional and arguably less hierarchical; i.e., the paternalistic model of “big brother” (*anh*) East Germany helping its needy Vietnamese “siblings” (*em*) had begun to break down. In the 1980s, as East Germany struggled with its own instabilities and shortages, solidarity efforts emphasized *mutual* aid that could bring economic and material benefits to both Vietnam and the

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25. Armstrong 2005, 163; Rüdiger 1996.

26. Bayly 2004, 334–35; Tran et al. 2010, 21.

27. Schwenkel 2012, 2013 (Post).



Fig. 2. GDR-rebuilt Cau Duoc Cement Factory, Vinh City, 2012. (Author photo)

GDR, though without undermining the latter's economic and technological superiority. For example, in response to a coffee crisis in East Germany, the two governments signed a cooperation agreement in 1980 whereby the GDR would fund the development and expansion of Vietnamese coffee production in return for the export of raw coffee beans.<sup>28</sup>

One of the largest and most ambitious of the mutual interest programs was the bilateral labor agreement implemented in the 1980s to "deepen the fraternal cooperation" between the countries by establishing a regular flow of Vietnamese labor to industrial centers in East Germany.<sup>29</sup> This generated two distinct waves of Vietnamese labor migration: The first, between 1981 and 1986, represented a smaller number of more highly skilled workers who were offered professional, on-the-job training as *Facharbeiter* with the intention that they would return to Vietnam to apply their newfound knowledge and qualifications to advance socialist industrial development. During the second wave, between 1987 and 1989, a revised protocol shifted the focus away from result-oriented, vocational training to a larger and lower-skilled, production-oriented labor force. The mutual benefits realized by the state were many: while the GDR mitigated its labor shortage and increased production output through foreign

28. File DK5 753, Bundesarchiv, Berlin. By July 1990, on the cusp of the dissolution of the GDR, more than 8,600 hectares of land had been cleared and cultivated, though less than 6,000 tons of beans had been exported.

29. The bilateral labor agreement, "Hiệp định giữa hai chính phủ về việc người lao động Việt Nam làm việc có thời hạn và bồi dưỡng nghiệp vụ tại các xí nghiệp CHDC Đức" [Bilateral agreement on Vietnam laborers working and receiving professional training in GDR enterprises] was signed on 4 November 1980.

workers, Vietnam, for its part, could alleviate rising unemployment and staggering postwar poverty, as well as embellish state coffers with a 12 percent social insurance tax paid by workers to rebuild the country.<sup>30</sup>

Over the course of the decade, until the fall of the Berlin Wall, more than 70,000 Vietnamese workers signed contracts — typically for five years — and left for East Germany. Approximately 12,000 workers traveled to the GDR in the first wave, and close to 60,000 workers during the second.<sup>31</sup> Women constituted 37 percent of this labor force, and most were in their mid twenties to early thirties. Although a reported 60 percent of laborers were married, family members were not allowed to accompany loved ones.<sup>32</sup> This led to painful, long-term separations as recollected in interviews. Vietnamese workers received up to three months of job and language training only, which prevented a deeper integration into East German society, even as many labored alongside German coworkers. Jobs were typically gendered despite a socialist rhetoric of equality: female laborers worked predominantly in light industry (namely, textiles and leather goods), with men concentrated in construction and mechanics.

It is important to note that Vietnamese migrant laborers were not *Gastarbeiter* as identified in much academic and public discourse, a term that referred to Turkish, Greek, and other “guest workers” in West Germany, but *Werkstätiger* (general worker), as they were officially called in the agreement, or *Vertragsarbeiter* (contract worker) in vernacular. Under socialism, the term *Gastarbeiter* carried connotations of capitalist exploitation of foreign laborers and was considered offensive when applied to Vietnamese contract workers, who saw themselves, rather uncritically, as having the same social protections and rights as their East German counterparts. In the words of one former worker I interviewed: “There was no discrimination like in the West where foreigners received little pay for the hardest jobs. We were given equal pay for the same work.” While indeed protected by East German labor laws, discrimination worked more insidiously, often through legal loopholes. Vietnamese workers, for example, were typically assigned manual labor jobs, which were paid lower than higher skilled positions most often held by East Germans.

In both systems, East and West, foreign workers were considered temporary migrants, and neither German state, nor sending country, envisioned long-term or permanent residency. This was evident in the controversial policy that Vietnamese women who became pregnant while employed in the GDR could either abort or return home to give birth, a regulation that the Vietnamese government

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30. The 12 percent tax was to go toward the “construction and defense of the Vietnamese fatherland” (Dennis 2011, 92). In 1987, this amount was deemed too low compared with other groups of foreign workers—Cubans, for example, paid a tax of 25 percent to their home country—and Vietnamese officials debated increasing the rate to 18 to 20 percent. In 1987 alone, the Vietnamese state collected 43.6 million marks from workers in the GDR. File 4409, Van Phong Chinh Phu 1957–1995, Vietnam National Archives III.

31. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung with Molisa 1991, 5. In 1987, close to 20,000 workers went to the GDR. This number increased the following year to 30,000 before decreasing in 1989 to 10,000.

32. Ibid.

criticized internally as “inhumane” (*khong nban dao*), and which the GDR government later changed.<sup>33</sup> As per Article 4 of the labor agreement, Vietnamese migrants were to be given “the same rights and responsibilities as East German workers,” such as equal pay for the same task, medical care, and *Kindergeld* (financial support for children). In addition, they also enjoyed benefits not extended to GDR citizens, such as free housing in dormitories (but not free utilities), a paid holiday on Vietnam’s National Day (later extended to include the Lunar New Year), and a paid return visit to Vietnam after two years of employment.<sup>34</sup> These extra benefits, which the local population often interpreted as special privileges, contributed to increasing economic envy and resentment.<sup>35</sup> Vietnamese workers, however, did not possess the same equal and unequivocal rights; they could not claim retirement support, for example, and their contracts could be terminated on short notice, as proved to be the case after German reunification.

Salaries were a particular point of contention with the Vietnamese government, which viewed GDR labor practices as discriminatory. Typically, monthly wages for Vietnamese workers averaged between 800 and 900 East marks before taxes, but could increase depending on productivity and amount of overtime work.<sup>36</sup> The highest income reported in interviews was 1,200 East marks for a translator and group leader, and the lowest, 400, a figure confirmed by Molisa, which claimed that 3.2 percent of workers earned a monthly wage of less than 500 East marks.<sup>37</sup> Though Vietnamese workers by law were paid the same wages for the same job held by East Germans, Vietnamese officials recognized that their workers were frequently assigned to perform less complex tasks paid at a lower *Lohnstufe* (wage level) than East Germans who were given more skilled (and higher *Lohnstufe*) positions. An internal document on the revised labor contract in 1987 thus condemned the average salary difference between GDR and Vietnamese workers (1,243 and 800 East marks, respectively), which, in turn, meant less foreign capital (taxes) transferred to the Vietnamese state.<sup>38</sup> Yet, as I discuss below, owing to elaborate trade networks that spanned from Asia to Europe and back to Vietnam, as well as to small businesses, such as sewing blue jeans for East German consumers, “wages came to form only a minor part of the profit to be made from a labor contract overseas.”<sup>39</sup>

A growing ambivalence toward Vietnamese workers in East German society ensued, as feelings of anti-imperial unity and appreciation of their labor pro-

33. File 4409, Van Phong Chinh Phu 1957–1995, Vietnam National Archives III. See also Raendchen 2000, 14–15.

34. File DQ3 2143, Bundesarchiv, Berlin.

35. For example, East Germans resented that Vietnamese (and other foreign workers) could shop at the hard currency Intershops to purchase goods they did not have to then presumably sell on the streets for a large profit (Zatlin 2007, 715–16).

36. This often became a point of tension with East German coworkers. According to one returnee: “We were there to make money. So we worked overtime and exceeded our quotas to increase our income. German workers were more concerned about their free time. So we made them look lazy and less efficient.” On racialized tensions in the workplace, see Schüle 2003.

37. Molisa 1993, 10.

38. File 4409, Van Phong Chinh Phu 1957–1995, Vietnam National Archives III.

39. Hardy 2002, 474.

ductivity (and ability to sew trendy clothing) in the early years gave way to accusations of illicit activities and of hoarding scarce goods.<sup>40</sup> The nostalgic recollection of a former Vietnamese group leader<sup>41</sup> at a tannery that produced exports for Italy summarized the shifts in affective relations and increasing xenophobia that he witnessed over the years:

The strong feelings of solidarity I experienced as a student [during the war in the 1970s] started to change as we became associated with the black market and with buying up the goods that Germans often lacked. Today that solidarity is gone. In the past we lived like Germans—we had a special relationship to locals and were treated equally as people who belonged. Now we are treated like foreigners.<sup>42</sup>

### Everyday Life in East Germany

In scholarship on foreign workers in East Germany, much of which is based on German archival resources only, there is a discernible lack of Vietnamese voices and interpretations of their own life experiences abroad. In these next sections, I turn to those very people who lived and worked in East Germany and then returned to their families in Vietnam. I am interested in how Vietnamese workers narrate and frame their experiences—narrations that are partial and selective, and at times peppered with nostalgia as the above quote reveals—and the extent to which their own understanding of the past complicates commonplace presumptions about mobilities under socialism. For instance, it is often assumed that Vietnamese workers who went abroad were the children of high-ranking officials and party members. While in some cases this certainly proved true, hypothetically, selection was based on a priority scale (*uu tien*) that gave precedence to war veterans, family members of martyrs and war invalids, former service members, ethnic minorities, and workers and cadres with excellent work histories.<sup>43</sup> Consistent with Decision 94-CT/TW from 30 May 1980, citizens with criminal backgrounds and “political complications” (*co van de phuc tap ve chinb tri*), particularly with regard to the wars against France and the United

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40. Schüle 2003; Zatlin 2007. Before leaving Vietnam, workers often mobilized capital in the form of gold, which they smuggled into East Germany to purchase goods to send back to Vietnam and sell on the black market (Beresford and Phong 2000, 84). As early as 1983, over 200 incoming Vietnamese workers were caught illegally importing gold. Subsequent purchase limits on commodities, such as motorbikes, bicycles, and sewing machines, followed due to the impact such consumption practices had on the local population. Files DY30 6494, DY 30 6547, Bundesarchiv, Berlin. As Zatlin has argued, hostility toward foreigners focused not on competition for jobs as is typical of xenophobia in the West, but on competition for scarce goods (2007, 679).

41. Group leaders acted as mediators between Vietnamese workers and German supervisors. They were in charge of facilitating communication and managing workplace and everyday discipline, not only for the enterprise, but also for the Vietnamese state. Each brigade of workers had a group leader, in addition to a translator, both of whom spoke fluent German and had previously studied in East Germany.

42. Interview with author, 12 August 2007, Hanoi.

43. These criteria as per Degree 09-CT/UB were laid out in the 14 April 1987 issue of *Nghe Tinb*, the Vinh City newspaper in a section entitled “Understanding Policy: The Recruitment of Overseas Labor.” Over the next nine months, public outrage over recruitment violations—from fake documents and forged martyr statuses to nepotism—sparked a series of critical editorials that accused local authorities of misconduct.

States, did not qualify for an overseas labor assignment because it was assumed they would not return. The priority criteria established, though not always adhered to, meant that citizens selected to work overseas at the level of *manual labor* were frequently from poorer, often rural, backgrounds and had no higher education. In a study of 1,200 returnees conducted by Molisa in 1993, an estimated 41 percent of workers had no prior vocational training and more than one-third were unemployed before leaving for the GDR.<sup>44</sup> With some exceptions, a general lack of political and social connections was consistent with the majority of the workers I interviewed, though translators and group leaders (most of whom had studied in the GDR in the 1970s) were of a different intellectual and sociopolitical class. This distinction becomes even more important when looking at the post-reform lives and livelihoods of returnees.

Representations of Vietnamese migrant laborers as victims of a cruel and abusive socialist system likewise abound, reflecting a racialized, cold war imaginary that, in some cases, continues to underpin contemporary thought. As early as 1983, Nguyen Van Canh, in his book *Vietnamese under Communism 1975–1982* insisted on the return of a half million Vietnamese workers “sent to Siberia and Eastern European countries as slave laborers,” drawing connections between overseas work contracts in the early 1980s to World War II labor camps.<sup>45</sup> The association of Vietnamese workers with slavery and forced servitude can still be found in academia more than two decades later.<sup>46</sup> Such associations also commonly surfaced in conversations in Germany when discussing my research. Images of what we would call today “sweatshop labor conditions”—with Vietnamese locked up, disconnected from German society, working long hours with no breaks and housed in miserable, overcrowded conditions—were prevalent. It is not my intention to argue against these representations, many of which take for granted the liberal individual as the subject of inviolable rights. As illustrated above, there were sufficient discriminatory practices and hardships that Vietnamese workers faced in Germany, especially given the painful separations from their families they endured. The novelist Duong Thu Huong captures eloquently the sense of isolation and melancholy that plagued many contract workers in her book *Paradise of the Blind*.<sup>47</sup>

Yet in most of these characterizations, there is an absence of Vietnamese voices framing their own migrant experiences. The narratives of the men and women I interviewed provided more complex and nuanced insights into this historical period and its profound material, social, and economic significance for themselves and their families. It is perhaps not surprising that returnees strongly resisted subject positions that ascribed them as victims. “Slaves?!” one man repeated, his face showing confusion, until he grasped the implication. “Who said that — people from the West?” Another man scoffed at the racialized assumption: “If we were slaves, then so were the Germans who worked with us.

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44. Molisa 1993, 4–6.

45. Nguyen 1983, 265.

46. See, for example, Bui 2003, 122–28.

47. Duong 1988.

Or, you can look at it another way: all people who work in a factory are slaves, not only the Vietnamese!” Were people forced by the government to work abroad?, I asked a female returnee, based on another assumption I often heard. “Who didn’t want to work overseas?!” she retorted. “Everyone wanted to earn money!” To be sure, this was not always the case; some of those eligible chose not to go abroad, mainly women who feared separation from their families. For still others, working overseas provided a rare opportunity to earn a good, stable salary with which to support their families. For others, it offered new freedoms to travel, shop, meet new people, eat new foods, and *di choi* (go out and have fun). In the words of one woman who used her salary to travel on weekends and purchase cosmetics at the Intershop: “I was young and excited to see and experience other places in the world!” Through their global mobility, migrant laborers became socialist cosmopolitans, if only temporarily, attaining new cultural knowledge and a broader worldview.

Most importantly, an overseas labor contract could help lift one’s family out of dire poverty. The postwar subsidy period in Vietnam saw decreasing agricultural productivity and escalating hunger and poverty, with limited food supplies and a scarcity of material necessities.<sup>48</sup> In urban areas, for example, children were typically rationed one hundred grams of meat per month, and their parents up to five hundred grams depending on their work unit. An overseas labor contract that could alleviate such shortages was thus highly desirable. The GDR, in particular, was envisioned as a socialist utopia compared with postwar Vietnam. According to one man who had worked at an electronics factory in Leipzig:

We used to say that East Germany was a paradise [*thien duong*]. It was an industrialized country; everything functioned well and life was easy. This was a place where people followed the rules. There were cheap trains that we could take without problems, and there was always enough to eat. Our housing was modern, with water and indoor plumbing. The quality of life was much higher than in Vietnam.<sup>49</sup>

Such a view was not uncommon. In interviews, former contract workers unanimously expressed the sentiment that living standards in the GDR were substantially higher than in Vietnam. They regularly commented on East Germany’s clean and orderly cities, high technology, and well-maintained facilities—in short, on the presence of an advanced, functioning infrastructure. The factories they worked in were considered more modern, their housing, with modern-day amenities, more comfortable (and for many, *less* crowded, given postwar shortages and shared units). Food was abundant (“I never ate breakfast in Vietnam,” commented one former worker), and material goods plentiful. Interviewees consistently identified East Germany as the most developed of the socialist countries, with the broadest range of quality commodities for purchase and resale, a shared observation that spurred an elaborate parallel economy largely dominated by Vietnamese workers, as I discuss below.

48. Dang 2009; Kerkvliet 2005.

49. Interview with author, 26 August 2007, Hanoi.

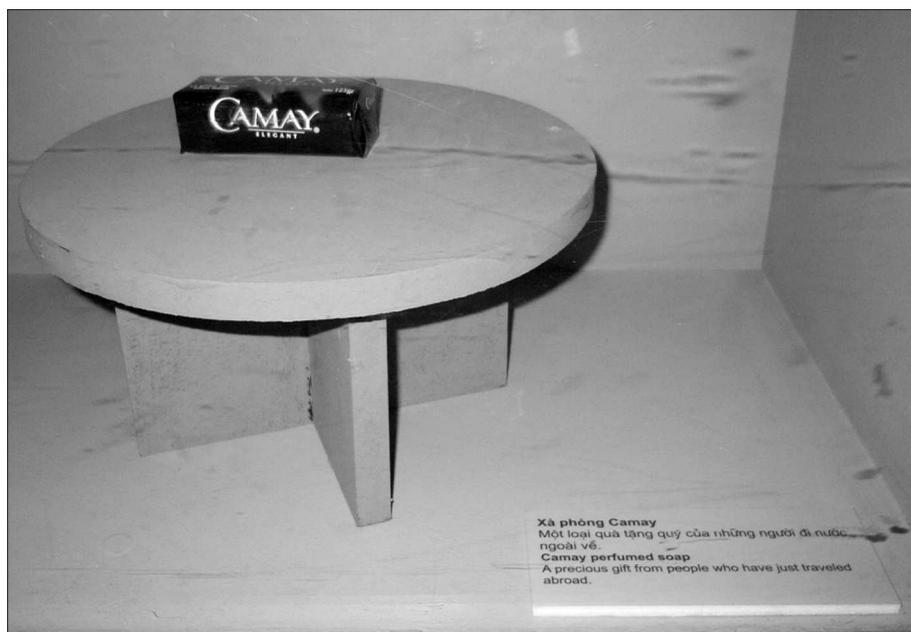


Fig. 3. Gifts from abroad: Camay soap on display at the exhibit, "Hanoi Life during the Subsidy Period 1975–1986," Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi, 2007. Caption reads: "Camay perfumed soap. A precious gift from people who have just traveled abroad." (Author photo)

The abundance of desired commodities was a driving force in the preference for East Germany over other East Bloc countries. For Vietnamese labor migrants, the GDR was a land not of scarcity as recollected in German memory, but of material plenty. Because financial remittances were not permitted at the time, and East German marks had no exchange value in Vietnam, laborers sent their wages home in the form of consumer goods and gifts to family members who could exchange them through social networks or sell them on the black market. Commodities including bicycles, motorbikes, fabrics, winter coats, cocoa, sugar, soap, radios, cameras, film, dishware, children's toys and clothing, and sewing machines found their way into houses and marketplaces across Vietnam (see fig. 3). According to their contract, labor migrants could send twenty kilograms of goods, with a value up to 50 percent of their income, duty-free every two months. Motorbikes, which could not be legally exported, were disassembled and smuggled out of the country in suitcases. Workers also sent additional shipments at their own cost. One man explained: "I sent a package of cocoa home each month—ten cans for 69 marks, and 50 marks for customs and shipping. The cocoa was given as presents to relatives or sold at the market. The value of ten cans was enough for my family to live for a month."<sup>50</sup> Today, diasporic remittances back to the homeland total almost US\$7 billion per year, or 11.2 percent of Vietnam's current GDP.<sup>51</sup> The circulation of commodities re-

50. Interview with author, 12 August 2007, Hanoi.

51. Small 2012, 157.

mitted by migrants during the subsidy years also played an important role in sustaining the national economy, reducing poverty for those who had family abroad, as well as saturating markets with scarce goods that were in high demand.

In interviews, returnees were animated when talking about their commodity consumption and the elaborate schemes they developed for acquiring goods that East Germans found difficult to obtain. When I asked one woman what she did with her income, her reply mirrored that of others:

I saved it! I spent only 120 marks on my monthly living costs. Every couple of months we were allowed to send a package home. I would send miscellaneous items like sandals, sugar, clothing, jackets, and sometimes a bicycle. I sent between four and five Diamant bicycles. And I also sent mopeds. There were two kinds that I bought: a Simson for 1,800 marks and a MZ Sport for 2,000 marks. My family sold them each for 2 million Vietnamese dong. That was a lot of money to us back then.<sup>52</sup>

Worth in this exchange economy was thus calculated according to the end goods and services that could be obtained (or repaid), rather than speculative surplus. For instance, one returnee from Hai Phong managed to export in his luggage two Simson motorbikes that he purchased for 1200 and 1500 East marks respectively. Despite the price differential, he sold each vehicle for nine taels of gold and invested the money into building a house. “You could say that I had good relations with the customs officials in the GDR” he laughed.<sup>53</sup> While technically, this man lost money on the deal—in foreign currency conversion at the time, a US\$650 moped was sold for US\$250—he did not evaluate intrinsic value in such monetary terms. Rather, his family profited from the goods and favors he was able to acquire to secure both land and scarce construction materials. That two motorbikes, roughly the value of two months of wages, were transformed into the equivalence of one free-standing house was considered a tremendous material gain for the family.

In addition to an advanced commodity culture, Vietnamese labor migrants also saw East Germany (and other Soviet Bloc countries) as a landscape of new business opportunities with little to no competition. Scholars have long noted the presence of a second or parallel economy under socialism in Eastern Europe—“those informal activities operating in integral relationship to the formal state-run production system but in its interstices.”<sup>54</sup> The black market in Vietnam was also vital to sustaining the national economy.<sup>55</sup> What is unique in the case of Vietnamese labor migrants, however, is the global scope and complexity of their trade, which spanned Thailand, Vietnam, China, Russia, and Eastern Europe. And not unlike the cases scholars have examined of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, a parallel economy coexisted in East Germany together with

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52. Interview with author, 29 August 2006, Vinh City.

53. Interview with author, 13 August 2007, Haiphong.

54. Verdery 1996, 211.

55. See, for example, Leshkovich 2011.

state-centralized planning, with the Vietnamese occupying an important economic niche in the system.<sup>56</sup>

Vietnamese workers were involved in a range of unofficial market practices: from small, home-based sewing collectives to expansive trade networks that imported “luxury” items such as jeans and lipstick from Thailand, through Vietnam and into Eastern Europe. No interviewee was *not* involved in some manner in the parallel economy. All described their paychecks as only part of their monthly earnings. “I didn’t have time to do overtime work! I was too busy trading [*buon ban*] in my free time and could earn much more,” one woman explained. Another described a profitable arrangement he and fellow workers had set up with the manager of a state-run shop, who would inform them of incoming shipments of coveted goods such as bicycles. Using savings from their salaries, as well as moneys from the sale of undeclared Asian imports (including gold smuggled in from abroad), Vietnamese traders would purchase the stock with the intent to resell the “scarce” commodities at a profit to East Germans, Vietnamese, or other groups of foreign workers. A cut would then go to the German manager. “So we could buy, say, one hundred bicycles for 120 Marks apiece and then resell them for a much higher price because there weren’t any left in the shop!... This kind of buying and selling made sense to us, but it never dawned on the Germans to do this. They didn’t think in business terms like we did,” one man involved in this scheme claimed.<sup>57</sup> Of course, the problematic assumption that Vietnamese were more savvy or motivated to earn money, which many of my interviewees expressed, breaks down with the recognition that East Germans also benefited from such transactions and relationships. As János Kornai has argued, in a shortage economy, every seller is a buyer, and every buyer a seller; this “chain of mutual favors” kept the underground economy well oiled.<sup>58</sup>

As Vietnamese workers developed their trade and business networks, they could better provide for their families through material remittances sent home. Consequently, emerging economic inequalities between relatives and between neighbors in Vietnam generated sentiments of envy and moral ambivalence as some family members came to be associated with the figure of the *con pbe*, a derogatory term in the subsidy period suggesting a dishonest trader or black marketeer who acquired goods from one source and sold them at a high markup. While publicly condemned, such practices were tolerated and accommodated, if not occasionally engaged in by people considered good moral citizens in order to survive. One woman, who worked in a dye factory, pondered the economic gap that transpired in her neighborhood: “My family was not wealthy; our standard of living was average, but we did have a more comfortable life than others and people did not have the goods we possessed.”<sup>59</sup> Material

56. Williams and Baláz 2005, 535. See also Beresford and Phong, who observed that Vietnamese workers “almost entirely controlled the underground market in the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s” (2000, 83).

57. Interview with the author, 26 August 2007, Hanoi.

58. Kornai 1980, 77; see also Verdery 1996.

59. Interview with the author, 28 August 2006, Vinh City.

goods thus showcased affluence and overseas connectivity: “Of course there was a lot of jealousy,” another returnee reflected. “It was a difference between having things or not. I returned with a lot of stuff, including a motorbike, and people saw that. Then I built a house when others couldn’t afford to do so. Those who went abroad had a head start over those who did not.”<sup>60</sup> Labor migrants not only recalled feelings of resentment between Vietnamese families, but also between Vietnamese and East Germans, some of whom believed that contract workers were paid in West marks, giving them the ability to purchase goods in the Intershops.<sup>61</sup> Percolating tensions came to the fore after the dissolution of the socialist regime, when decreasing standards of living and rising unemployment in the East led to demands, sometimes expressed through violent means, that foreigners, especially contract workers “go home.”

### Return to Vietnam

For most Vietnamese workers in East Germany, the head start—the higher standard of living and the cosmopolitan lifestyle they enjoyed—was short-lived. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, most labor contracts were annulled as factories in the East shut their doors or reduced operations and laid off workers. This placed workers in a precarious position; many had left their jobs in Vietnam to accept a five-year contract. Should they remain overseas and attempt to find new work, perhaps in the more affluent West, or should they return to Vietnam with no stable employment waiting? To discourage the former, the German government signed a repatriation agreement with Hanoi on 13 May 1990 in hopes of persuading Vietnamese migrants to return. Workers with legal status were entitled to 3,000 West marks, in addition to severance pay and a free ticket home, if they willingly left Germany. Over the next six months, over 30,000 workers—more than half the Vietnamese labor force—opted for this settlement and returned to Vietnam with few employment prospects.

Back in Vietnam, the socioeconomic landscape had changed considerably. Urban residents were beginning to reap the benefits of economic reforms as once-scarce foods and commodities increasingly flooded the markets. An emerging non-state business sector was slowly taking shape and signs of an urban, middle-class consumer culture were starting to appear. The economic and material disparities between families with and without relatives overseas began to narrow as the geopolitical climate shifted dramatically, fueling a new global knowledge economy that valued expertise and experience differently.<sup>62</sup> Returnees grappled with the devaluation of their labor and many refused to accept work with a monthly wage of less than US\$30. Reverse culture shock and social reintegration proved difficult for migrants who had become used to a particular culture and standard of living in Germany—“fair and straightforward, unlike Vietnam,” one man reminisced. As unemployment rates soared among returnees

60. Interview with the author, August 13, 2007, Haiphong.

61. Bui 2003, 129.

62. Schwenkel 2013 (Soviet).

—to more than 67 percent according to one study<sup>63</sup>—the higher socioeconomic status migrant workers and their families once enjoyed declined rapidly in relation to other citizens whose economic and social well-being had begun to rise. In the words of one man, who struggled for years with unemployment after his return:

Clearly families like mine once had a much higher standard of living. How could they not? We had a good income overseas. Today, there is no longer such a gap. It is not like it used to be. Vietnam has developed and people have more money, even those who did not go overseas. Returnees had a very hard time coming back. Many have not been able to find jobs. As workers, we came from poor backgrounds. We went abroad and earned money. But after our return we became poor again.<sup>64</sup>

All of the returnees I interviewed described difficulties finding employment after their repatriation from Germany, affirming a condition of ambiguity and complex instability that has been well documented in the literature on return migration in Asia.<sup>65</sup> Even today, many returnees continue to move from job to job as *lao dong tu do* (independent laborers) and do not possess a stable income. Those who do work are typically employed in the private sector, unlike the group leaders and translators with *trinb do van hoa cao bon* (higher education; literally, higher level of culture), who returned to use their social and political capital to get ahead in the state sector—capital that was not available to low-skilled workers.<sup>66</sup> This is not unlike the case of Vietnamese workers returning from Korea who, as Suhong Chae has shown, have also struggled with the steep depreciation of their labor upon returning to Vietnam, and with difficulties finding employment with a sustainable income.<sup>67</sup> In both cases, an overseas labor contract gave migrants and their families an economic boost, if only temporarily. Chae argues that returnees from Korea have, at times, been able to utilize their experiences and knowledge of the Korean language to obtain work with Korean organizations or businesses in Vietnam. This has generally not been the case for returnees from Germany, with the exception of group leaders and translators who possess a high degree of language proficiency, unlike low-skilled workers. Rather, the returnees I met held a broad range of low-paying jobs as domestic workers, drivers, market vendors, parking attendants, security guards, cashiers, scrap metal collectors, lottery ticket vendors, repairmen, and pagoda caretakers. Others, as I describe below, opened small businesses, with varying degrees of success.

The repatriation compensation received from the German government initially helped many returnees to reestablish themselves, if only briefly. In the words of one woman: “That money went quickly.” Returnees were prudent with

63. Molisa 1993, 11.

64. Interview with the author, 29 August 2006, Vinh City.

65. See, especially, Xiang 2013.

66. Later in life, particularly after retirement, these cadres went on to work in the NGO or private sectors as consultants and small businesspeople. While not absolute, their successful reintegration, compared with manual laborers, is noteworthy and points to persistent forms of stratification across the socialist and late socialist eras.

their savings and used their money carefully to leverage their future, often investing in land (to build a house) or a joint business venture, as encouraged by government programs (and funded by Germany) that endorsed market-based solutions to downward mobility. Most of these small, local businesses failed because returnees had no experience with the new administrative procedures required to run their firms. They also lacked capital to expand and, in the opinion of one official in Hai Phong, management skills to keep their businesses afloat. A woman from Vinh City, the child of a martyr who worked in a shoe factory in Leipzig, is a typical example, enduring years of unemployment and several failed enterprises after returning in 1990:

Before I went to Germany, I worked in a factory, but they did not hold my job. So I was unemployed after I returned. I decided to work for myself and opened a small “cheap eats” restaurant with my sister. Other returnees also contributed funds. But it was very small and we had little capital. We thought the business would be a success, but this was a time when people were starting to earn more money and larger, nicer restaurants opened up. We couldn’t compete.

As returning migrants struggled to find work and start businesses in a new knowledge economy, Germany signed an agreement with Vietnam in 1992 to provide financial support for services that would help prevent former contract laborers from falling back into poverty. The ten-year “Returnee Program,” carried out by German development organizations, focused on both economic and social reintegration. Low-interest loans were available for new startups, provided applicants had a viable business plan and authorized paperwork. Given returnees’ general unfamiliarity with the new legal infrastructure and with rationalized market planning strategies, as well as their discomfort with loans (preferring to borrow cash from relatives and friends), the credit program was vastly underused. Vocational training and educational services assisted the migrants in founding new occupations (“From Simple Worker to Tailor,” read one report to Molisa).<sup>68</sup> Returnee clubs and reunions provided a venue to network with colleagues and to exchange information. “SYB” (Start Your Business) courses for “SMEs” (small and medium enterprises) educated participants on labor laws, financial management, and the use of capital in line with a market-based approach to national development. Ironically, in their quest to produce law-abiding, market-oriented entrepreneurs, Germans—whom the labor migrants once considered lacking in business acumen—were responsible for helping the returnees—assumed by Germans to be fledglings in business—to develop “local” firms that were often more global than recognized since returnees could also tap into international networks they had developed as traders in East Germany’s parallel economy.

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67. Chae 2010.

68. Molisa 2000.

## The Labor of Post-Socialist Nation Building

The material legacies of socialist mobilities continue to make their presence felt on the post-reform Vietnamese landscape. The prospering Viet Duc (Viet German) sausage company, which sells its *xuc xich* in supermarkets around the country, for instance, was cofounded by a man who had studied in Dresden. Indeed, most of the successful entrepreneurs I encountered had been students (and thereafter brigade translators and group leaders) rather than workers. Upon their return to Vietnam, they were able to mobilize their social and political connections to gradually expand their businesses and increase their economic capital over time rather than expend it. Some lower-skilled workers did profit from their investments, especially in land and housing. But with few exceptions, their business endeavors were on much shakier ground. Many subsequently returned to Germany, some illegally, to the social and trade networks they had established overseas utilizing business logics and practices that differed significantly from those taught in the SYB training.

After German reunification, labor migrants came home to a new economic playing field with different actors—Americans, for instance—emerging on the scene. Their uncertain futures and difficult reintegration posed a challenge to the salvation narrative that the opening of Vietnam to market capitalism would provide an escape from socialist isolation and lack, to a condition of global inclusion, prosperity, and mobility. For some Vietnamese, this tale may ring true to their experience. For others, like the labor migrants, the reverse has occurred under market reforms: their lives became more immobile, economically and geographically. As such, I see this case study as contributing to what James Ferguson calls an “anthropology of decline” that traces the ambivalence that people who find themselves excluded from claims of progress feel toward current forms of globalization, what I have elsewhere identified as “post-socialist affect.”<sup>69</sup> Such disenchantments remind us that globalism today is as much about “planetary communion” as it is about “disconnection, segmentation, and segregation.”<sup>70</sup> More attention to *disengagements* and to processes of becoming *disconnected* in Vietnam, rather than novel and emerging interconnections, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of this late socialist society as it undergoes sweeping socioeconomic and geopolitical change.

The experiences gleaned from returning socialist labor migrants also pose an important challenge to contemporary export labor policy and to the government’s dependence on such contracts to improve the standard of living at home. The case presented here shows that poverty reduction is not long term and that manual laborers typically do not acquire more than basic manufacturing and technical skills. Returnees today face some of the same educational and occupational dilemmas as their predecessors, perhaps even more so given the high fees paid to secure a position overseas, often resulting in cycles of debt and usury. Yet the government continues to promote its labor force as it did in the

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69. Ferguson 1999; Schwenkel 2013.

70. Ferguson 2006, 49.

1980s. The racialization of export labor is not a new observation. However, the role that the Vietnamese state has played in shaping an image of its workforce as exceptionally diligent is worth noting here. In a 1987 report on the revised labor agreement with East Germany, Vietnam's labor minister remarked that GDR management "has observed that the Vietnamese are the best and most disciplined of all the foreign workers in the GDR—even more productive than East Germans...and request that we send higher numbers of workers to their enterprises."<sup>71</sup> And continue to send they did, as they do today, in line with a national strategy to "eradicate hunger and reduce poverty." In the long run, however, circulations of laboring bodies may prove to be more profitable and beneficial to the state and state-run recruitment agencies than to Vietnamese workers and their families.

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71. File 4409, Van Phong Chinh Phu 1957–1995, Vietnam National Archives III.

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