

Bazaar Pagodas – Transnational Religion, Postsocialist Marketplaces and Vietnamese Migrant Women in Berlin

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Abstract

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakdown of the East German Socialist government, thousands of former contract workers from Vietnam stayed in the then reunified Germany. Due to their resulting precarious economic situation, a large number of these migrants became engaged in small business and petty trade. Some of them, women in particular, have become successful entrepreneurs and wholesalers in recently built bazaars in the eastern parts of Berlin. Most interestingly, parts of these urban spaces, former industrial areas on the periphery of Germany's capital, have been transformed into religious places. This article explores the formation of female Vietnamese Buddhist networks on the grounds of Asian wholesale markets. It argues that transnational mobilities in a post-socialist setting encourage border-crossing religious activities, linking people and places to various former socialist countries as well as to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Further, by considering political tensions between Vietnamese in the eastern and western part of Berlin, this contribution illustrates the negotiation of political sensitivities among diasporic Vietnamese in reunited Germany. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among female lay Buddhists, it focuses on entrepreneurship and investigates the relationship between business, migration and religious practices.

Keywords

religion, transnationalism, gender, Vietnamese, Buddhism.

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Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Igitur publishing

Germany. She was the Director of a Research Project on 'Transnational networks, Religion and New Migration', funded by the German Research Foundation and is currently directing a new project on 'The Global Bazaar'. Recent publications include her co-edited book: *Traveling Spirits: Migrants, Markets and Mobilities*, Oxford/New York: Routledge 2010.

Introduction

Religion is a powerful marker of incorporation into the host society, allowing migrants simultaneously to maintain connections with the country of origin and forge new ties with migrant communities in other countries. When moving to other countries for various economic and/or political reasons, migrants carry religious beliefs along with them, and gathering for religious purposes is one way of setting up a new life in unfamiliar surroundings.¹ In many cases, migrants' organisations, institutions, meetings and gatherings transform the religious landscape of the host society. At the same time, the architecture of migrants' places of worship, the names of spirits they venerate, the prophets they follow and the religious experts they invite, differ from religious practices in their country of origin.

In the following I explore religious practices among Vietnamese female lay Buddhists in Berlin, Germany.² I investigate how religious practices in the diaspora are shaped by the revitalization of religion in Vietnam, by the fall of the Berlin Wall and how experiences of transnational migration do have an impact on women in becoming mobile agents to participate in pilgrimages and to foster religious ties to the home country. Notably, this article focuses on the intersection of gender, religion and migration in the production of diasporic religious identities in a particular locality, namely the bazaar. By referring to what has been coined as 'religion on the move'³ and to transnational migration and diversity,⁴ it seeks to de-homogenize and de-essentialize representations about 'the' Vietnamese in German public discourse.

As scholars have pointed out, ethnic and cultural ties are increasingly operating at a transnational rather than merely national level. The critique of methodological nationalism⁵ has further indicated the difficulties of 'naturalizing' the nation. Studies focussing on the transnational flows of people, goods, ideas, religious practices and economic and political affairs cannot conceptualize the nation as the main analytical category for exploring interrelated issues in contemporary societies.

¹ R.S. Warner, 'Immigration and Religious Communities in the United States' in R.S. Warner and J.G. Wittner (eds.), *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press 1998, 3. See also the article by Ryan and Vacchelli in this special issue.

² This paper is based on my ongoing research project 'The Global Bazaar', funded by the German Research Foundation (HU 1019/3-1), and on my former research project on 'Transnational Religious Networks' (HU 1019/2-1 and HU 1019/2-2).

³ P. Levitt, 'Religion on the Move: Mapping Global Cultural Production and Consumption' in C. Bender, W. Cadre, P. Levitt, and D. Smilde (eds.), *Religion on the Edge. De-Centering and Re-Centering the Sociology of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, 159–176.

⁴ N. Glick Schiller, 'Transnationality', in D. Nugent and J. Vincent (eds.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*, Malden, MA: Blackwell 2004, 448–467; S. Vertovec, 'Super-Diversity and its Implications' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29:6 (2007), 1024–54.

⁵ A. Wimmer and N. Glick Schiller, 'Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation – State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences' in *Global Networks* 2:4 (2002), 301–334.

Therefore this paper seeks to understand the relationship of gender, migration and religion⁶ in regard to the mobility of religious practitioners and political sensitivities among different groups of diasporic Vietnamese, and it ventures to investigate religious emplacement as a contested process in the urban area. In particular, it questions the shifting gender roles of female Buddhist Vietnamese in reunited Germany and points to gendered processes in the context of migration, related to patriarchal norms and power relations in both Vietnam and Germany.

Religion, Migration, and Gender

The global flow of money, the emergence of consumer culture, and the desire to access consumer goods, are some of the reasons for the increasing economic and religious activities in Vietnam and corresponding diasporic networks. Similar to various transnational religious mobilities in Southeast Asia,⁷ such as Thai Buddhism to Singapore,⁸ cross-border religious activities shape the host country's religious landscape. Not only Buddhism, but many religions, and even spirits, travel between two or more countries,⁹ due to processes of missionization, migration, and mobility. For example, spirit beliefs and practices have taken on an important role in addressing the discontinuities and uncertainties of modern life in South East Asia.¹⁰ While global processes and the liberalization of the socialist economy in the past two decades have deeply informed the revitalization of religious practices in Vietnam,¹¹ these processes do have an impact on the Vietnamese diaspora as well.¹²

⁶ G.T. Bonifacio and V.S.M. Angels (eds.), *Gender, Religion and Migration. Pathways of Integration*, Lanham: Lexington Books 2010.

⁷ P. Kitiarsa, 'Missionary Intent and Monastic Networks: Thai Buddhism as a Transnational Religion' in T. Chong (ed.), *Sojourn, Religion and Politics in Southeast Asia*, 25:1 (2010), 109–132. J.T. Daniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press 2008, 257.

⁸ P. Kitiarsa, 'Buddha-izing a Global City-State: Transnational Religious Mobilities, Spiritual Marketplace, and Thai Migrant Monks in Singapore' in *Mobilities* 5:2 (2010), 257–275. See also J. McDaniel, 'Buddhists in Modern Southeast Asia' *Religion Compass* 4 (2010), 657–668.

⁹ G. Hüwelmeier and K. Krause (eds.), *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities*, Oxford, New York: Routledge 2010.

¹⁰ K. Endres, A. Lauser (eds.), *Engaging the Spirit World. Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*. London, New York: Berghahn Books 2012. K. Endres, *Performing the Divine: Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) Press 2011.

¹¹ P. Taylor (ed.), *Modernity and Re-enchantment in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 2007.

¹² G. Hüwelmeier, 'Socialist Cosmopolitanism Meets Global Pentecostalism. Charismatic Christianity Among Vietnamese Migrants in Germany' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies, Special Issue. 'Cosmopolitan sociability. Locating transnational religious and diasporic networks'* G. Schiller, T.D. Nina, and G.D. Sandra (eds.), 34:3 (2011), 436–453. K. Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien, *Spirits without Borders. Vietnamese Spirit Mediums in a Transnational Age*, Palgrave Macmillan 2011. A. Soucy, 'Re-establishment of the Truc Thien Buddhist Sect' in P. Taylor (ed.), *Modernity and Re-enchantment in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 2007, 342–370.

In the 1980s, a small group of Vietnamese refugees started building Buddhist places of worship in West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG) as well as in the western part of Berlin. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a new group, former Vietnamese contract workers from the eastern part of Germany, began visiting the Buddhist pagoda in the western part of Berlin, as no such places existed in the GDR (German Democratic Republic). Buddhist practices have become quite popular among former contract workers in recent years, as demonstrated by their building of pagodas in bazaars in the eastern part of Berlin. The majority of worshippers are women in their 40s and 50s. An increasing number of female Buddhists now travel to various places of worship all around Germany and back to Vietnam, transgressing local, regional and transnational borders and maintaining social, economic and religious ties across continents. This raises the question whether gender roles among diasporic Vietnamese are being shifted, negotiated or reproduced as a result of this movement. What impact does the history of migration have on gendered religious identities? What kinds of experiences are relevant in the lives of transnational Vietnamese migrants in regard to joining Vietnamese Buddhism in the west? How are 'gendered geographies of power'¹³ negotiated across transborder spaces?

The research for this article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2007 and 2008 as well as in 2012 and 2013 among Vietnamese former contract workers in Berlin and return migrants in Hanoi, as part of a broader investigation of religious and economic aspects of transnational life of the Vietnamese diaspora. My contribution draws on participant observation in Buddhist pagodas in Germany and in Vietnam. I conducted formal and informal interviews with religious experts and lay practitioners in Hannover, a city in the western part of Germany, where the largest Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda in Europe, *Vien Giac*, was built in 1991, in the Lin Thuu pagoda in the western part of Berlin, in the bazaar pagoda of the *Asia Pacific Center* in the eastern part of Berlin and during Buddhist ceremonies held on the grounds of the *Dong Xuan Center*, the largest wholesale market run by Vietnamese migrants in Berlin. On special occasions, about 5000 buddhists gather in Hannover, about 500 to 1000 in the Lin Thuu pagoda, while in the new bazaar pagodas about 30 to 200 Buddhists come together several times a year. The growing presence of Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas in Berlin's cultural landscape and in particular in the new bazaars has to be studied as part of the transnationalization of religion. To my surprise it appeared that in the multi-ethnic bazaars I visited in Warsaw and Prague as part of my multi-sited fieldwork, Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas were in the process of being built in the new marketplaces run by Asian migrants. In these localities as well I met Vietnamese Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people. A considerable number of female lay Buddhists became mobile agents, connecting people and places in various countries.

During my encounters with women describing themselves as devout Buddhists in Berlin, I realized that their narratives were immediately connected to migration, and, second, that economic success was interpreted by them as an outcome of their religious practices. In this article I portray two women of

¹³ S.J. Mahler and P.R. Pessar, 'Gendered Geographies of Power: Analysing Gender across Transnational Spaces' in *Identities* 7:4 (2001), 441.

Vietnamese background, who became active Buddhists only after migration in a (post)socialist context. Thus I am less concerned with the elite personnel, such as monks and nuns, but with the everyday lives of ordinary devout Buddhists as mobile agents. Migrants' narratives are part of my ethnographic fieldwork and thus give insights into the history, meaning and implications of emerging religious identities and gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship in dynamic global contexts.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, that is, the unification of the former socialist East Germany and liberal democratic West Germany, the religious landscape among Vietnamese migrants changed significantly. Once their residence status was finally certain, a number of former contract workers rented shops, became retailers, and started to create small altars in shops, snack bars, and restaurants, mostly in the eastern areas of Berlin. They use these shrines to venerate *Ong Than Tai* (God of wealth) and *Ong Dia* (God of the earth),¹⁴ asking for the protection of the territory of their shops and the well-being of the owners and their family. The small altars first emerged in the eastern part of Berlin, but can now also be seen in the western part of the city, as some of the Vietnamese former contract workers from the east are moving to western areas of the city. In the Lin Thuu pagoda, female traders bring small shrines to the Buddhist nuns to receive blessings. Thus, Vietnamese women's practices in the pagodas are connected to business activities, as they pray for good luck and economic success, and for happiness in the family. Most of the female lay Buddhists in the diaspora practise various religious traditions, similar to religious practitioners in Vietnam. Ancestor worship, the veneration of spirits, soul calling and the participation in spirit possession cults (*len dong*), are performed by many female Buddhist. Praying in the pagoda, consulting the monk or nun, burning incense and donating money, praying at home at the ancestor altar or bringing offerings such as cigarettes for the gods at the shrine in one's own shop is all part of Vietnamese religion.

Different Groups of Vietnamese Migrants in East Germany

Prior to the fall of the Berlin wall, tens of thousands of Vietnamese migrants arrived in the eastern part of Germany. In the following, I will point to what I call *socialist pathways of migration*.¹⁵ I define socialist pathways of migration as particular forms of mobility that are immediately connected with the exchange of people, goods and knowledge among socialist 'brotherlands' during the Cold War period. The current discourse about Vietnamese in Germany still refers to 'the' Vietnamese community, a term that assumes there is a single homogeneous group of Vietnamese

¹⁴ G. Hüwelmeier, 'Spirits in the Market Place of Vietnamese Migrants in Berlin' in M.P. Smith and J. Eade (eds.), *Transnational Ties: Cities, Identities, and Migrations* (CUCR book series, 9), New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 2008, 131–144. During my fieldwork in Hanoi in 2007 and 2008, I realised that these altars existed in many shops. See also A.M. Leshkovich, 'Women, Buddhist, Entrepreneur: Gender, Moral Values, and Class Anxiety in Late Socialist Vietnam', in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1:1–2 (2006), 277–313: 293.

¹⁵ G. Hüwelmeier, 'The "Children of Uncle Ho" – Socialist Cosmopolitans in East Germany' in K. Hansing and M. Matusevich (eds.), *Socialist Migrations During the Cold War*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013 (forthcoming).

with one distinctive culture, but it is now time to refine the research lens to take into account the diverse groups of migrants from Vietnam who entered the GDR at different times, with different objectives and in different places.

Taking debates on diversity and super-diversity¹⁶ as my point of departure, I distinguish mainly three groups of Vietnamese entering socialist East Germany at different times. The first group is known as *the Moritzburger*, a group of about 300 children who arrived in Vietnam's socialist 'brotherland', the GDR, in 1955. They spent most of their childhood and youth in the GDR, after 1954, when North Vietnam was successful in the anti-colonial war against France. They returned to Vietnam and became quite influential in politics and sciences. A second group of Vietnamese in East Germany was made up of students, male and female, who left Vietnam during the American War in the late 1960s and early 1970s and who were invited by the government of the GDR. After their return to Vietnam, a number came back to the GDR some years later to work as interpreters for thousands of contract workers. Finally, mass migration from Vietnam to the GDR occurred in the 1980s, when the economic situation in socialist Vietnam worsened and the GDR was in need of contract workers from other countries. Like the students, most of the contract workers were children of cadre families and involved in the youth organizations of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

After the breakdown of Communism in the GDR, the state-owned enterprises, responsible for the 'foreign' workers, no longer existed. Thousands of Vietnamese, contract workers as well as interpreters, started small-scale trading; some of them became successful entrepreneurs during the 1990s and later on rented stalls in one of the bazaars in the eastern parts of Berlin, in 'global trade centres' managed by Vietnamese. It is on the grounds of these trade centres that Buddhist places of worship were very recently built to satisfy the religious needs of clients and traders in the bazaar.

Boat refugees, who were not part of the socialist pathways of migration, are conceptualized as the 'political other' of contract workers. They left Vietnam after the end of the American War in 1975, for either economic or political reasons. The contrasting treatment of Vietnamese refugees in West Germany and Vietnamese former contract workers in East Germany and the resulting differences in their legal, economic and social situations in reunified Germany still shape the relationships between these groups to this day. With the renewed popularity of Buddhism in Vietnam as well as in the Vietnamese diaspora, boat people and former contract workers encounter each other in Buddhist places of worship, making pagodas sites in which tensions between the two groups are negotiated.

Vietnamese Buddhist Places of Worship in Berlin

The Linh Thuu pagoda in western Berlin is part of a Buddhist Vietnamese network in the western part of Germany¹⁷ that includes a number of places of

¹⁶ S. Vertovec, 'Super-Diversity and its Implications' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29:6 (2007), 1024–54.

¹⁷ M. Baumann, *Migration-Religion-Integration. Buddhistische Vietnamesen und hinduistische Tamilen in Deutschland*, Marburg: Diagonal Verlag 2000, 76.

worship located in big cities, such as Hamburg and Munich. Most famous is the *Vien Giac* pagoda in Hannover, one of the largest Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas outside of Vietnam. According to the female leader of the Linh Thuu pagoda, a Buddhist nun from Ho Chi Minh City, no such place of worship existed in the eastern part of Germany before 1989. This was one of the reasons why many former contract workers travelled from other regions in eastern Germany to visit the Linh Thuu pagoda after the reunification of Germany. Followers of the Linh Thuu pagoda feel attracted by the Pure Land Buddhism. Amitabha Buddha, known as A-Di-Da Phat in Vietnamese, is the key figure in this form of Buddhism.

During our encounter, the nun reported about the tensions and difficulties she has experienced among Buddhist practitioners in the western and eastern parts of Berlin. She pointed to the suffering of the boat people in the West, who had lost their homes and their friends and relatives. This is the reason, she continued, 'why many of them feel bitter towards the communist regime, and they carry a burden. They experienced too many losses with regard to children, relatives, and money on the boat. So they feel more bitterness in their souls compared to people living in Vietnam', and compared to the former contract workers in Germany. She was able to assess the degree of resentment as she regularly travels to Vietnam to visit a partner pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City and thus is exposed to worshippers in both countries.

The differing life experiences of boat people and former contract workers in Vietnam and Germany shape the way they use the pagoda and their perceptions of the respective other group. According to the nun, the number of contract workers visiting the pagoda has increased in recent years. She attributed this to the socio-economic and legal situations of the former contract workers and the arrival of new non documented migrants, stating that 'because Vietnamese from here [in the western part of Berlin] have a more regulated life, they come to visit the pagoda only then and now. However, life in the eastern part of Berlin is more difficult, many Vietnamese live without documents, they have a lot of difficulties and so they come quite often to this pagoda, hoping their wishes will be fulfilled.' While a small pagoda in the western part of Berlin was founded by Vietnamese boat refugees already in the 1980s, some of whom are still quite active at the site today, these followers are viewed differently by other visitors to the pagoda, such as one female Buddhist practitioner, a former contract worker from the eastern part of Berlin. She commented: 'They [the boat refugees] are sitting around the whole day, while we [former contract workers] donated all the money for building the new pagoda.' Perceiving herself and others from the socialist period as hard workers and generous donors who are unable to visit the pagoda regularly due to their work obligations, she employed stereotypes to criticise boat people, depicting them as people who do not work hard, and claimed that many are dependent on the German welfare state. As these statements demonstrate, political issues and sensitivities related to the division between north and south Vietnam before 1975 are still part of religious identities among Vietnamese in Germany, even more than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In 2007, a new pagoda was inaugurated on the grounds of the *Asia Pacific Center*, a Vietnamese wholesale market in the eastern part of Berlin. On this occasion, Vietnamese monks from France had been invited by the female manager of the market and by the Buddhist lay group of about 30 people, mostly female traders, all of them former contract workers. In 2012, I met a monk

in this same bazaar pagoda, who was affiliated with Plum village in France, a centre of Buddhism in the West, and who appreciated the teachings of the famous monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who left Vietnam decades ago. The monk in the Berlin pagoda was thus not aligned with the officially recognized Buddhism in Vietnam.

According to the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, and the 'Engaged Buddhism', a 'major transnational movement',¹⁸ 'it is important to learn to deal with difficulties in our family relationships rather than to run away from them'.¹⁹ However, this contradicts Confucian values, as this philosophy does not reinforce positive qualities and emotions, but the subordination of women. In the bazaar pagoda, counselling for family and marital issues was part of the monk's work and engagement. In addition, he helps parents understand the new ways of life in the migration context. Second-generation kids no longer strictly obey the often strong rules of their fathers and mothers, and this causes many problems in diasporic Vietnamese families. Traders and clients in the marketplace appreciate the existence of the bazaar pagoda, as they can pray at any time without losing time to travel to the pagoda in the western part of the city.

Only recently, a new place of Buddhist devotional practice was inaugurated on the grounds of the biggest wholesale market in the eastern part of Berlin, the Dong Xuan Center, run by a Vietnamese manager who was a contract worker in the socialist GDR. At the moment, this bazaar does not house any monks or nuns. The female leader of the group of Buddhist traders, a former contract worker and business woman, invite monks from various regions in Vietnam, yet all of them are connected to the officially recognized Buddhist Sangha in Vietnam. Being officially recognized in Vietnam means that religious organizations must 'consult with the government, about their operations, including leadership selection, and are supervised by the Office on Religious Affairs.'²⁰ Religious activities that are not officially registered are illegal in Vietnam. The fact that the Vietnamese Embassy in Berlin participated in the inauguration ceremony of the Buddhist place of worship in the Dong Xuan Center signalled that this direction of Buddhism is aligned with the officially recognized Buddhism in Vietnam.

As I have illustrated, various directions of Buddhism are represented in Germany, and politics plays a role in religious activities and thought among Vietnamese migrants. While the majority of female Buddhist practitioners I met during my fieldwork, most of them former contract workers, do not care about the doctrines of any direction of Buddhism, and do not care about politics, others made clear statements about it. Thus, religion is not always a matter of boundary crossing, in some cases it is a marker of creating boundaries.²¹

¹⁸ Taylor 2007, 26.

¹⁹ J. Chapman, 'Return to Vietnam of Exiled Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh' in P. Taylor (ed.), *Modernity and Re-enchantment in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 2007, 297–341: 322.

²⁰ Chapman 2007, 311.

²¹ G. Hüwelmeier, 'Creating and Refining Boundaries – Church Splitting Among Pentecostal Vietnamese Migrants in Berlin, in *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Sciences*, published online December 2012, DOI 10.1007/s12124-012-9225-8.

When I asked Mrs. Van, a businesswoman and founder of the Buddhist network in a Berlin bazaar, whether she also visits the pagoda in the western part of Berlin, she answered: 'We [former contract workers] would never go there, as they [boat refugees] fought against our government.' Although her statement is an exception or an exaggeration, it should be considered a way of generating stereotypes and creating boundaries between different groups of Vietnamese migrants in Germany, boundaries that are reinforced through religious practice.

Mobility and Gendered Religious Identities

To better understand women's motivations for visiting Buddhist places of worship, becoming active Buddhist practitioners in Germany, and how they maintain transnational religious ties to their homeland and other places, I will focus on the experiences of Mrs. Thuy,²² who arrived in East Berlin as a Vietnamese contract worker in the late 1980s, leaving her husband and children behind in Hanoi. When the first contract between the GDR and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was signed, only single women or men were accepted as workers. Thus socialist pathways of migration do have an impact on gendered geographies of power.²³ However, due to increased labour demand in the late 1980s, married Vietnamese also received permission to work in the GDR, but had to travel on their own while their families remained in Vietnam.

From Contract Worker to Snack Bar Owner

Mrs. Thuy was married in Vietnam and came to the GDR as a contract worker in 1988. She had a spouse and two children in Hanoi, but simultaneously had a lover in Berlin, who also had a spouse and child in Hanoi. After some years, both lovers decided to give up their love affair and bring their families to Germany. After her husband arrived in Germany, while their grown-up children remained in Vietnam, Mrs. Thuy tried everything to make the family a happy one. The couple even had a third child together. In 2005, one of their adult children died in Vietnam, which was an enormous shock for both parents. After this tragic incident, they realised that their relationship was not going well and the husband returned to Hanoi and asked for a divorce. Mrs. Thuy was aware of the marital problems, and simultaneously, she was disappointed and felt a lot of anger inside her heart, as she had to earn money and take care of her ten-year-old son. She became the owner of a small restaurant in Prenzlauer Berg, a gentrified region in the eastern part of Berlin, where most of the better-off Vietnamese run small grocery stores, nail studios or bistros. Her job is very strenuous and she has to work more than ten hours a day, hiring workers and preparing food.

After she lost her elder daughter, Mrs. Thuy, in her late 40s, became a Buddhist. Like in Vietnam, many women in her age become increasingly devout after the

²² I changed all names to protect my informants.

²³ Mahler and Pessar, 'Gendered Geographies of Power'.

age of forty, while young women only rarely participate in Buddhist practice.²⁴ However, the case presented here is immediately connected with transnational family life. As Mrs. Thuy suffered from severe health problems, she had to undergo surgery. Yet, as the pain did not decrease after this, and doctors in Germany could not help her, she travelled to Vietnam, visited a Buddhist pagoda, and met an old and experienced monk who healed her and gave her blessings for her life. Since then she has visited the Linh Thuu pagoda in Berlin whenever she had time and travelled with a group of female Buddhists to other places of worship in Germany, while simultaneously welcoming monks from various parts of the world in her Berlin restaurant. She is convinced that those who live their lives in accordance with Buddhist rules in their everyday activities, such as becoming vegetarians, not lying, not gossiping, not stealing, and not practising 'bad' sexual behaviour, will become happy and successful in their lives. Mrs. Thuy participates in pilgrimage, visiting a pagoda in the suburbs of Hanoi to receive blessings for her business and to perform rituals and prayers for her deceased daughter. Her business in Berlin is running very well right now, so she has placed a Buddha statue near her cash machine and built an altar in her bistro with the picture of the monk from Hanoi, praying and bringing offerings every day.

Sharing one's life with another partner, while being married to someone else at the same time, is not compatible with 'Confucian values' that are still in effect in contemporary Vietnamese society. According to this heritage, the subjects governed by the ruler 'are considered to be analogous to the members of a household who are assumed to be controlled by a senior male', thus, 'Confucianism does not encourage equality but respect of those who personify social order',²⁵ and this means a wife's obedience to her husband. However, due to rapid processes of globalization and the development of transnational ties, gender roles are currently being negotiated in Vietnam as well as in the diaspora, and religion, particularly Buddhism, is significantly influencing and being influenced by these changes.

An increasing number of Vietnamese in Berlin suffer from economic and marital problems. Although there are no statistics, it is estimated that about 30% of Vietnamese are separated or ask for divorce in the diaspora as well as in the home country. Vietnamese men in Germany only rarely take care of their children after separation; in most cases they already live with another woman, in other cases they have returned to Vietnam. As a result, divorced women – divorce often takes place in Vietnam, not in Germany – do not receive any financial support from their former husbands, and many Vietnamese women in Berlin become the breadwinners for their families, supporting their children in Germany and sending money back home, either to their children in the home country or to their ageing parents in rural or urban settings in Vietnam. Some of the single mothers look for spiritual support in the pagoda, reporting that they leave behind family problems and negative emotions.

²⁴ A. Soucy, *The Buddha Side. Gender, Power and Buddhist Practice in Vietnam*, Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press 2012, 201. Leshkovich, 2006, 290.

²⁵ H. Rydstrom and L. Drummond, 'Introduction', in L. Drummond and H. Rydstrom (eds.), *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, Singapore: Singapore University Press 2004, 7, 8.

Irregular Female Migrants – Marriage for Documents

Irregular migrants from Vietnam in Germany experience tremendous hardship. Some of them seek advice from the Catholic Church, while others join Pentecostal Charismatic Churches²⁶ in order to get through traumatic experiences. The narrative of Mrs. Huong illustrates the sorrows of an irregular migrant and the disappointments of a single mother of two children in Berlin. She was a contract worker in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, arrived in Berlin after the fall of the Berlin Wall and first came into contact with Vietnamese Buddhists in Germany when she was visiting her sister, who took her to the Vien Giac pagoda in Hannover. Since then, Mrs. Huong has been participating in ceremonies in Berlin in the Lin Thuu pagoda, for the past 15 years. She recently began participating in rituals and teachings held in the newly built place of Buddhist worship in the Dong Xuan Center, a huge bazaar in the eastern part of Berlin.

In this place, Mrs. Huong advertised for her nail studio by distributing leaflets after a religious gathering. Active participation in religious networks enable migrant women to become successful entrepreneurs. Buddhist networks as well as gatherings of other religions, such as Pentecostalism,²⁷ are of growing interest with regard to the economic empowerment of women. Likewise, spirit possession cults in Vietnam are dominated by women,²⁸ and economic success is one of the main goals in participating in these kinds of rituals. Most Vietnamese female religious practitioners hope to increase their business, as participating in consumer culture is important for the emerging middle classes.

It was in the bazaar that Mrs. Huong first heard about the new Buddhist gathering in the eastern part of Berlin. As she is visiting the Dong Xuan Center on a regular basis to buy part of her equipment for her nail studio, she was informed about the new group of Buddhist practitioners via advertisements in the marketplace. A small number of female Vietnamese Buddhist practitioners started gathering in the bazaar shortly before, in 2011, by renting a dance hall and transforming it into a place of worship for special occasions. In this multi-functional space, with mirrors on the wall, an altar with a Buddha statue was located behind a curtain. This way of religious place-making is quite common among recently built religious localities all over the world. Cinemas, warehouses and former factories are transformed into sacred places. According to Massey's understanding of localities, a locale is not a bounded entity but evolves as a network

²⁶ G. Hüwelmeier, 'Moving East. Transnational Ties of Vietnamese Pentecostals' in G. Hüwelmeier and K. Krause (eds.), *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities*, Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2010, 133–144.

²⁷ R. van Dijk, 'Social Catapulting and the Spirit of Entrepreneurialism. Migrants, Private Initiative, and the Pentecostal Ethic in Botswana' in G. Hüwelmeier and K. Krause (eds.), *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities*, Oxford, New York: Routledge 2010, 101–117.

²⁸ K. Endres, "'Trading in Spirits"? Transnational Flows, Entrepreneurship, and Commodifications in Vietnamese Spirit Mediumship' in G. Hüwelmeier and K. Krause (eds.), *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities*, Oxford, New York: Routledge 2010, 118–32.

of social relations and practices.²⁹ In her view, localities are always in the making and contested. Likewise, the transformation of a dance hall into a Buddhist place of worship within minutes, illustrates the ability for improvisation in a period of transition, when a 'real' pagoda does not yet exist. Although the group of participants was quite small, about 30 people, musicians and a female choir formed part of the 'cultural programme', as did a Vietnamese media team. As in many transnational religious communities, ICT networks (information communication technology) and cameras are used widely in spreading messages and reports from religious events across continents.³⁰

A few weeks later I met Mrs. Huong in her place of business, where she narrated her life experiences. After she left the Soviet Union in 1991, Mrs. Huong immediately applied for asylum in Berlin and was transferred to a small town in the eastern part of reunified Germany, near the Polish border, to live in a home for asylum seekers. From there she was transferred to another town in the eastern part of Germany, where she met her partner, a Vietnamese asylum seeker himself. She became pregnant and her first child was born in 1994; a second child followed in 1996. When her second baby was one year old, the father returned to Vietnam, as he had been rejected as an asylum seeker. As they were not married, there was no divorce. Shortly afterwards Mrs. Huong looked for a German spouse so as to not be rejected as an asylum seeker and to have the chance of receiving a residence permit. A German friend helped her place a partner search announcement in a Berlin newspaper, which is how she met Mr. Meier, a German, whom she married. From the very beginning, she reported to me, the marriage was solely for documents. Mr. Meier, however, had different expectations, and after he realised that he was living in a *Scheinehe*, a marriage of convenience, many problems resulted from this in their relationship. It was a tough time for Mrs. Huong, not least due to the fact that Mr. Meier was an alcoholic. They finally divorced after 5 years. Only after five years of marriage with a German can 'irregular' Vietnamese receive a residence permit.

The experiences of Mrs. Huong illustrate that gendered power relations can be reversed in the migration context. Before marriage, she was dependent on her German partner, as she was in need of documents. After the marriage, she became economically successful while her husband's work suffered due to his alcoholism. During these years of marital stress and trouble, Mrs. Huong visited the Linh Thuu pagoda on a regular basis, as she believed that praying helped her deal with her difficult situation.

²⁹ D. Massey, 'Questions of Locality' in *Geography* 78 (1993), 142–149, 148. See also K. Krause, 'Spiritual Spaces in Post-industrial Places: Transnational Churches in North East London' in M.P. Smith and J. Eade (eds.), *Transnational Ties: Cities, Identities, and Migrations* (CUCR book series 9), New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 2008, 109–130. S. Mazumar and S. Mazumar, 'Religious Placemaking and Community Building in Diaspora' in *Environment and Behaviour* 41:3 (2009), 307–337.

³⁰ Garbin and Vasquez, 'Sacred Connections'; M. de Witte, 'Religious Media, Mobile Spirits: Publicity and Secrecy in African Pentecostalism and Traditional Religion' in G. Hüwelmeier and K. Krause (eds.), *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities*, Oxford/New York: Routledge 2010, 83–100. G. Hüwelmeier, 'Mediating the Apocalypse. The Demise of the Titanic and the Vietnamese Diaspora' in H. Behrend, A. Dreschke and M. Zillinger (eds.), *Trance-Mediums and New Media*, New York: Fordham University Press 2013 (forthcoming).

Female entrepreneurs like Mrs. Huong visit pagodas for worldly purposes; they want to be successful in their business, strive for good health, pray for sick parents and wish to have a happy family. On special occasions, they bring offerings to the pagoda, such as fruit, and burn incense. Like in Vietnam, women make offerings and wishes at the altars of the buddhas and then reclaim these offerings, called *loc*. Conceptualized as a gift from the spirits or buddhas, *loc* is 'seen as spiritually charged by the supernatural and so able to bring luck to the bearer. Its subsequent distribution, usually to family members, can therefore be seen as part of the fulfilment of expectations for women to be primarily concerned with the family'.³¹ Thus, caring for the family in Vietnamese culture and society is immediately connected to gender structure and, therefore, to gender hierarchies. In the migration context, however, as the case studies have illustrated, gender roles are shifting, in particular when women become single mothers and divorced women.

Conclusion

Religious activities in the former socialist part of Germany, namely in the eastern part of Berlin, and in other post-socialist countries in Europe, are intrinsically interwoven with the transformation from socialism to capitalism. Likewise, the religious revival in contemporary Vietnam and its integration into a global capitalist system is intimately linked to economic changes and the emergence of new patterns of consumption. Both the political and economic transformations in Germany in the 1990s as well as the recent renewal of Buddhism in Vietnam have had a great impact on Vietnamese in reunified Germany, particularly on former contract workers, most of them living in the eastern part of the country.

The migration context in Germany is characterized by many difficulties ranging from acquiring legal residence status to marital issues raising children in a society not governed by the same values as those of the home country. Vietnamese female migrants have turned to Buddhism in order to find support in these matters of daily life. Visiting Buddhist places of worship, participating in rituals, and making offerings are all practices strongly related to mundane purposes such as excellent high school diplomas for children, economic success, and good health. In this regard, Vietnamese Buddhist activities in Germany bear a resemblance to Vietnamese Pentecostal networks in Berlin, characterized by the 'health and wealth gospel'. However, differently from Pentecostal networks, Buddhist women are not asked by monks to destroy the ancestor altar at home and to abandon their belief in being protected by (male) dead family members. In this way, Buddhist women uphold 'traditional' religious practices inherited from Confucianism and characterised by patriarchal values.

Further, in contrast to female Pentecostal Vietnamese believers in Germany, who are constantly trying to convert their spouses into loving and caring husbands and fathers, thereby reversing Confucian values, gender roles in diasporic Buddhist networks tend to be reified, as women are expected to carry economic and emotional burdens of their families. In the Berlin pagodas, Buddhist women

³¹ Soucy 2012, 202.

participate in rituals, while men only rarely, if ever, accompany their wives to the places of worship. Men, if they visit the pagoda at all, prefer to study Buddhist texts. This is important to the construction of masculinity in Vietnamese culture, as it draws on Confucian images of the *literati*.³² With respect to gender, Confucianism with its focus on ancestor worship, male hierarchy in family, social and political life, is still dominant in Vietnam as well as in the diaspora. Yet, in the migration context there are only few men performing this kind of religious knowledge. Notwithstanding the tendency to reify gender roles in Buddhist networks in the diaspora, there is, as the case studies have illustrated, no 'overall hegemonic structure of gender', a structure 'that implicates the subjugation of women to men by maintaining inherently unequal social structures.'³³

Migration is a factor of social transformation, with the challenges of the migration process and different attitudes and practices in the host country leading to changes in family life and gender roles. In the Vietnamese diaspora in Germany, many women experience an enhanced status as well as power in their family structures as a result of becoming the breadwinner and sending remittances to relatives in the home country, taking care of the nuclear family in Germany on a daily basis, and travelling to Vietnam to help ageing parents. Moreover, gender identities are also being shaped by the rising popularity of Buddhism among diasporic Vietnamese, former contract workers in socialist countries. A number of Vietnamese women have become mobile agents by participating in pilgrimages to various Buddhist places in Germany and in Vietnam, establishing and strengthening links to places and people. By generating new mobilities and creating and maintaining transnational economic and familial ties, Vietnamese Buddhists in the diaspora, many of them business women inside and outside the bazaar, become travelling religious practitioners, simultaneously enlarging their networks and connecting socialist home and capitalist host country.

³² Soucy 2012, 204.

³³ Soucy, 2012, 204.