

# みんなくりポジトリ

国立民族学博物館 学術情報リポジトリ National Museum of Ethnology

## The Vietnamese Diaspora in Japan and Their Dilemmas in the Context of Transnational Dynamism

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 川上, 郁雄 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15021/00001271">https://doi.org/10.15021/00001271</a>

## **The Vietnamese Diaspora in Japan and Their Dilemmas in the Context of Transnational Dynamism**

**Ikuo Kawakami**

Waseda University

### **Introduction**

One of the most significant characteristics of the 20th century was the extensive movement or displacement of people around the globe. This social phenomenon has continued into the 21st century and has had a considerable impact on human life around the world. This population movement includes migrants, foreign workers, refugees and displaced persons with various social, economic and political reasons for moving transnationally. The phenomenon is closely related to anthropological concerns such as nationalism, racism, ethnic groups, ethnicity, citizenship, traveling and diaspora, memory and history, violence and conflicts, development and human rights, hybridity, creolization, transnational communities, community networks, and the like. However, those involved in this phenomenon of transnational migration are not necessarily crossing borders and recreating their lives in the same way.

For instance, where refugees or displaced persons are concerned, they are leading a life in which there is continual uneasiness and fear of persecution, discrimination and instability in domestic relocation centers or even in the countries in which they resettle. Consequently, it is not sufficient to see refugees as an alternative type of immigrant. Rather, it is a very important anthropological issue to study how those human beings and their families referred to as refugees are recreating their life world in the various situations caused by transnational population movement. In particular, it is an aim of anthropological study to deepen our understanding of the life of human beings in this newly changing world through focusing on their inner life world and ethnic identity.

### **Vietnamese Refugees and Their Life in Japan**

Japan has accepted only approximately 11,000 Indo-Chinese refugees since 1978. Despite their small number, these refugees have had a significant impact on Japanese society. For example, the arrival of refugees in Japan made the Japanese government ratify international treaties such as the International Covenants on Human Rights in 1979, and the United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1981. Consequently, domestic policies relating to foreigners living in Japan have been drastically improved.

However, the conditions of Indo-Chinese refugees' lives in Japan have not been static. As Liisa Malkki suggests, the refugee's "identity is always mobile and proce-

dural, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, etc.” (Malkki 1992: 37).

Why are refugee identities mobile and procedural? Kawakami (1999) explains how Vietnamese refugees’ life world in a host country is made up of “inner influences” and “outer influences.” “Inner influences” are composed of social, political and cultural relationships within the ethnic community: for instance, the relationship between the refugee family located in a host country and other family members living in other host countries, as well as those left behind in the homeland. This is also influenced by the fear and uneasiness caused by information from Vietnam and the Vietnamese government. Such information is disseminated in the Vietnamese language and creates discourses within the ethnic community. These discourses work as inner influences on their life world through the Vietnamese language both in the host country and in their homeland. On the other hand, their life world is influenced by social, political and cultural factors within the host country and internationally. Such factors are referred to as “outer influences” (Kawakami 1999), which include the industrial structure in Japan, social welfare services, the educational system, the legal system, the housing situation, public awareness, and attitudes toward refugees and Vietnam. Their life world is therefore located between these inner and outer influences.

These inner and outer influences can become either an advantage or a disadvantage. These may include feelings such as alienation and exclusion, or feelings of success on the part of the refugees or envy by those in the homeland. Consequently, Vietnamese refugees mostly lead an unstable life characterized by such feelings. The fluctuation between these inner and outer influences is often the biggest issue in their lives. Their life strategies and ethnic identities are therefore constituted and recreated both negatively and positively, as James Clifford notes (Clifford 1994: 311).

In the following sections, I will divide these 30 years of Vietnamese refugees living in Japan into four periods of time characterized by international and political events, and explain the life world of Vietnamese refugees in Japan in relation to these.

## **Four Periods of Time: Vietnamese Refugee Resettlement in Japan**

The first period is from the “Fall of Saigon” in 1975 to the enforcement of domestic laws regarding refugee reception in 1981.

The second period is from 1981 to the economic reform called *doi moi*, which means “economic liberalization policies,” in Vietnam in 1986.

The third period is from 1986 to the restoration of diplomatic relations between the USA and Vietnam in 1995. This period includes both economic growth in Vietnam and the declaration of the end of the Indo-Chinese refugee issue by the International Refugee Committee in 1994 in Geneva.

The fourth period is from 1995 to the present. During this period, Vietnam has

developed its economy and has established its economic base in the East Asian region.

How has the life world of Vietnamese refugees in Japan changed during these four periods of time characterized by international and political events?

### **The First Period (1975–1981)**

The first Vietnamese refugees to enter Japan arrived in May, 1975. However, these Vietnamese were allowed to land in Japan not as refugees, but as persons rescued from a “maritime disaster” because Japan had not ratified the so-called “Refugee Treaties.” In other words, they were unwanted guests of the Japanese government. The Japanese government tried to watch them and control their lives. In fact, although the government officers thought the refugees could land in Japan, they fully expected them to leave the country soon. At the same time, most of the Vietnamese refugees landing in Japan had no intention of settling in Japan. Many Vietnamese hoped to enter the USA because they had enjoyed their consumer lifestyle and freedom in South Vietnam thanks to ample aid from that country, and many of their relatives had resettled there.

At the same time, however, the USA was trying to close the doors to new refugees because of their large numbers. Consequently, many Vietnamese were obliged to wait for a long time, sometimes many years, at temporary refugee camps in Japan. While staying at those camps, some wanted to learn English rather than Japanese. It often took Vietnamese refugees a long time to give up the idea of going to their first-choice destination and to come to terms with settling in Japan. It was with disappointment and reluctance that most Vietnamese refugees were forced to embark on resettlement. Disappointment is one of the biggest characteristics of the Vietnamese refugee experience in Japan in this first period. It strongly influenced their adaptation to Japanese society in the initial stage of resettlement.

In this first period, Vietnamese refugees’ hope to settle in the USA and their disappointment and reluctance were inner influences, while the perceptions and attitudes towards Vietnamese refugees of both the Japanese government and the American government were outer influences.

### **The Second Period (1981–1986)**

After the Japanese government decided to ratify the international refugee treaties, Indo-Chinese refugees became eligible for four months’ training to assist with settling in Japan at the Resettlement Promotion Centers run by a governmental organization. These centers provided refugees with Japanese-language education, social adaptation guidance and occupational arrangements. After the training at the centers, they were deemed to be resettled in Japan. Jobs and houses were arranged for them in over 30 prefectures. In many cases, however, they tended to change jobs after several years and move to the

suburbs around the metropolises of Tokyo and Osaka. This was because there were not only large manufacturing factories in these areas, but also many subcontracting factories that suffered from a continual shortage of cheap labor. In other words, these Vietnamese refugees were absorbed into the industrial structure of the Japanese economy as a substitute labor force for factories where ordinary Japanese workers did not want to work.

As a result, Vietnamese communities have been formed in these outlying city areas and social networks indispensable for their life in Japan have developed within these communities, including political and religious organizations. For instance, an anti-communist organization was established in 1983 for the purpose of solidarity and mutual aid for all Vietnamese in Japan. This organization is one of the overseas branches working against the communist government of Vietnam through its global network. In the early 1980s, up to 80 or 90 percent of the Vietnamese refugees in Japan joined this organization, but it is currently in decline because of its strong political orientation, demonstrated in statements such as “Don’t send money to your family in Vietnam” or “Once you go back to Vietnam, you will be expelled from the organization.”

In terms of political organizations, another organization also existed that supported the communist government of Vietnam. It consisted mostly of Vietnamese students staying in Japan at that time, who were in favor of the communist government. Although their numbers were then very small, they were always opposed to the anti-communist organization described above.

In terms of religion, the Vietnamese in Japan are divided into two groups: Buddhist associations and Catholic associations. Although over half of the Vietnamese refugees are estimated to be Buddhist, they are not active because they do not have a large temple. On the other hand, Vietnamese Catholics are very active. They join the churches for Japanese Catholics and attend Mass every Sunday, have wedding ceremonies and baptisms there, and hold Vietnamese-language classes for their children, all of which use church facilities. Catholic churches are therefore often seen as the centers of Vietnamese people’s lives, in both a physical and a spiritual sense.

In this early stage of resettlement in Japan, Vietnamese refugees were busy in reconstructing their lives rather than joining political organizations, and there was a tendency for them to leave such organizations for religious organizations.

In the early 1980s Vietnam’s economy was in a state of devastation because of the rapid construction of socialism, and overseas Vietnamese refugees were always worried that the families and relatives they left behind in their home country were suffering from poverty and food shortages.

In the second period, Vietnamese refugee communities and their political and religious networks were the inner influences, while Japanese government policies concerning Indo-Chinese refugees, Japanese society, and Japanese industrial structure were the outer influences.

### The Third Period (1986–1995)

After the *doi moi* economic reform in Vietnam, the economy gradually developed. Prior to *doi moi*, Vietnamese who had escaped from Vietnam were called *ke phan quoc*, meaning “traitors,” but after *doi moi* they were called *viet kieu yeu nouc*, “patriots, who would save the nation.” They were welcomed back to their home country because overseas Vietnamese brought in or sent to their relatives and families in Vietnam foreign currency and everyday merchandise, which had an important influence on the economy in Vietnam.

Vietnamese living abroad were often referred to as *Viet kieu*, or literally “overseas Vietnamese,” with feelings of jealousy and envy from the viewpoint of Vietnamese residing in Vietnam. For the government and civil servants, *Viet kieu* were seen as “useful” providers of foreign currency. Often *Viet kieu*, upon entering the country, are required to give the immigration officer a ten-dollar bill in order to ensure smooth processing of their entry. They are also required to pay a higher price for transportation services such as trains, buses and airplanes. Additionally, the entrance fees to museums, entertainment facilities and even grocery prices are higher for *Viet kieu* than for Vietnamese citizens.

The *Viet kieu* therefore find themselves discriminated against when visiting Vietnam, and as a result the use of this nomenclature creates feelings of uneasiness and inferiority, sparking frustration, anger, and resentment among most of them. This means even when they return to their homeland, they feel uneasy.

In this way, in the third period *doi moi* economic reform in Vietnam and its influences were significant in their impact on overseas Vietnamese as inner influences.

In terms of outer influences, the so-called “economic refugee” or “quasi-refugee” issues and media reactions to them were also strong influences on Vietnamese refugees in the third period. Many Vietnamese, as well as Chinese disguised as Vietnamese refugees, landed in Japan with the intention of earning money in Japan rather than escaping from persecution. The Japanese government’s primary concern then shifted from refugee issues to issues of the illegal entry of foreigners into Japan. Media discourse regarding refugees changed drastically. In the late 1970s, the media portrayed Vietnamese refugees as victims of an evil regime who needed to be rescued. However, in the late 1980s, when “economic refugees” became common, the media’s attention focused on pressing the government to deal strictly with opportunistic refugees.

Even within the Vietnamese community there were many different views on Vietnamese refugees. For instance, refugees from Central and South Vietnam described refugees from the North as “communists,” “economic refugees,” or “a gang committing crimes in Japan,” while they regarded themselves as “political refugees.”

In addition, Chinese Vietnamese tended to work at Chinese restaurants run by Chinese people in the Chinatowns in Kobe and Yokohama, and lived separately from

North and South Vietnamese. They pretended not to have anything to do with refugee issues. By the late 1980s, Vietnamese refugees were fully settled in Japanese society and the diverse opinions of Vietnamese residents started to be heard. For instance, there were arguments regarding whether sending money back to their families, who were suffering from poverty in Vietnam, meant contributing to the communist government which was struggling because of economic underdevelopment. Furthermore, the statement by the International Refugee Committee in 1994, that the Indo-Chinese refugee issue was over, led Vietnamese refugees to rethink their lives in Japan.

In this way, the life world of Vietnamese refugees was influenced by the situation in Vietnam as well as those of Japan and the international community. These inner and outer influences came together, making their lives fluid and placing them in a state of constant flux. As is typical for most families within a dynamic transnational context, this is an important aspect of the life world of Vietnamese refugees.

### **The Fourth Period (1995 to the Present)**

During the past decade, the life of Vietnamese in Japan has drastically changed. The number of newcomers from Vietnam has increased. They are temporary visa holders such as university students, factory trainees, and specific purpose visa holders. They are legal visitors authorized by the present Vietnamese government. In the late 1970s and 1980s, refugees formed the majority of the total number of Vietnamese residents in Japan; however, at present, they are estimated to form only one-third of the total population (28,932 as of 2006) of Vietnamese in Japan.

Young Vietnamese students at the tertiary level in Japan, who did not experience the Vietnam war and hardships before *doi moi*, are divided into several groups according to the districts where they live in Japan, all of which are controlled by the Vietnamese embassy in Tokyo. The embassy and these students communicate with each other over the Internet or by e-mail. Most of them do not have any knowledge about Vietnamese refugees in Japan.

Another group of young Vietnamese comprises factory trainees and other temporary visa holders working under contract in Japanese factories. They are made to work long hours for little pay, while a large part of their salary, as well as their passports, is held by the factory owners to prevent them from escaping before their scheduled return to Vietnam after a couple of years working in Japan. In other words, they are substitute workers replacing Japanese workers at the bottom of the industrial structure in Japan. The Vietnamese government does not seek an improvement in the situation of young Vietnamese workers in Japan, because they bring back Japanese yen, even if in small amounts, as well as technical skills. Some Vietnamese refugees who have been working under similar conditions at the bottom of the Japanese industrial structure are sympathetic to those young Vietnamese workers and try to support them.

Among the Vietnamese refugees, some think there are lucrative business opportunities in trading between Vietnam and Japan, in particular, by dealing in second-hand goods such as televisions, refrigerators, motorcycles and tractors. This means that their perception of going back to Vietnam has changed. Previously many refugees regarded returning to Vietnam as a form of betrayal, but now they tend to think that returning to Vietnam is not so bad. Male Vietnamese in Japan returning to seek a bride in Vietnam provide one example of this. Those in their thirties who came to Japan in their teens find it difficult to find suitable spouses in Japan because of the male-female imbalance in the Vietnamese community. At the same time, for female Vietnamese this offers a good opportunity to leave Vietnam for a rich country such as Japan. Indeed, some new wives take advantage of this and divorce soon after landing in Japan.

At present, there are two major issues in the Vietnamese community in Japan. One is the younger generation of Vietnamese who came to Japan as infants or were born in Japan. They do not have sufficient Vietnamese-language proficiency to communicate with their parents, and have little experience of living in Vietnam. As a result, young Vietnamese feel a gap between themselves and the values and the way of life of their parents. Many have a feeling of not belonging and negative feelings regarding their ethnic background. In addition, their academic achievements at school are relatively low, and the proportion entering tertiary institutions is also low. Because of their difficulties in social mobility due to leaving school at the secondary level, they do not have a positive self-image or concrete future goals.

The second issue relates to the first generation of Vietnamese refugees in Japan who are in their forties and fifties. They are facing difficulties in finding work and still feel an uneasiness about living in Japan, which intensifies as they get older. Most of them express a desire to eventually return to their homeland in Vietnam. Burial in Japan is a serious issue for them.

In the fourth period, the outer influences have changed. For instance, although Japanese government policies, media attention, and Japanese societal concern for the refugees have become weaker, many Vietnamese, including university students and factory trainees, are now integrated into Japanese society. In addition, the fact that the Vietnamese economy has developed and its international status in the East Asian region has improved have acted as outer influences on the lives of Vietnamese residents in Japan. Meanwhile, information spread through the community network has changed the Vietnamese life world drastically as an inner influence.

## **The Vietnamese Diaspora in Japan and Their Dilemmas**

In 1995, the former Vice President of South Vietnam, Nguyen Cao Ky, who escaped to the USA after the fall of Saigon in 1975, stated that overseas Vietnamese should return to Vietnam and join in the reconstruction of the country (*The Asahi Shimbun* 30 April



1995). The reaction of the overseas Vietnamese communities was one of opposition. However, with the economic recovery of Vietnam during the last decade, there has been an increasing flow of material goods and information, such as Vietnamese food, fashion and travel to Japan. Popular songs on CDs and laser karaoke disks, as well as rental videos imported from Little Saigon in California, are also increasingly available at ethnic shops in Japan.

In such domestic and international contexts, members of the Vietnamese diaspora have to rethink whether or not their escape from their homeland was a correct decision in relation to their lives and those of their families. They hold a range of different images of life in other countries. For example, the USA is perceived to be a dangerous society because of the proliferation of gun crimes and the difficulty in finding employment without sufficient English-language proficiency. Meanwhile, Australia is seen as a friendly country with a pleasant climate and vast space, but an income tax rate so high that living there is difficult; here too, English proficiency is indispensable for success. On the other hand, the Vietnamese in the diaspora in Japan see Japanese society as safe and affluent, with no guns and with plenty of consumer goods that can be traded as second-hand goods in other Asian countries. In this way, Vietnamese refugees in Japan share the narratives of their lives and compare the advantages and disadvantages of living in Japan.

At the same time, they make comparisons of life in Vietnam with that in Japan, such as the warmer climate and cheaper cost of living in the former. For the first generation of Vietnamese refugees, their desire to return to Vietnam and feelings of homesickness increase with the information obtained through the extensive community network. It is not easy for them to return to their homeland, however, as nobody can provide them with a secure life in Vietnam. Their return also means a second separation from family because it is unlikely their children will leave Japan for Vietnam in the future.

Facing such dilemmas, both older and younger Vietnamese are struggling with the location of their identities. The level of instability in the life world of overseas Vietnamese therefore increases and decreases as the inner and outer influences present in both the domestic and international contexts change.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined 30 years of Vietnamese refugees living in Japan through four periods of time marked by international and political events. I have also unveiled the life world of Vietnamese refugees in Japan. In summary, I will present some anthropological points relating to the lives and the study of refugees.

Firstly, the study of refugees is an important area in which to develop an understanding of human life in the context of transnational dynamism. The life world of Vietnamese refugees in Japan has been drastically changed by inner and outer influ-

ences from domestic and international sources for over 30 years. In particular, for first-generation refugees, important information is gathered through Vietnamese-language networks. The first generation of refugees generally has a strong desire to return eventually to Vietnam, and this is influenced both positively and negatively by information obtained either through international Vietnamese language networks or from Vietnam. Consequently, their life world is fluid and dynamic. This issue is a significant anthropological theme because it provides a perspective from which to study human life in the 21st century, influenced by multiple domestic and international factors.

Secondly, studies of refugees are not the same as studies of immigrants. For instance, when socialism unified Vietnam in 1975 many Vietnamese left their homeland in fear and were regarded as refugees. In other words, those who were unable to fit into socialist society formed a minority within the country and felt forced to find a home elsewhere. In a sense, every modern nation striving to unify internal diversity and plurality under one political ideology creates political minorities, in the same way as the majority ties its people together with a centripetal nationalism. Every nation thus contains within its original structure a refugee-creating mechanism. Those who leave their homeland in fear of persecution and enter another country, however, are again faced with the paradox of being a minority group in the host country, creating what Kato (1994) calls “the double tragedy of the refugee.” Refugees are mostly concerned with their legal status and the restrictions imposed on life as a minority in the host country. For instance, refugees cannot travel abroad freely because they usually do not hold passports. Even if they hold a passport and an appropriate re-entry visa while returning to their homeland temporarily, they still feel discriminated against and are usually treated as if they are “foreigners” in Vietnam. Nevertheless, they are expected by their families or relatives left behind in the country to send some money back, as evidence of their success in the host country. Meanwhile, other people in the host country continually ask them whether they are “political” or “economic” refugees. Refugee studies inevitably focus on “refugee identity” in their constantly changing life world that is influenced by domestic and international factors. In this way, the study of refugees is significantly different from the study of immigrants in general.

Thirdly, refugee issues are strongly related to transnational population movements and “transnationality” (Koizumi and Kurimoto 2006). As described above, the life world of refugees is not simply explained in terms of assimilation in their host country because it is also expanding across national borders under constant transnational change. This is occurring because of connections with other family members and relatives in other countries. These fractured families are in fact located in many different places. The meaning of “family” has therefore changed considerably from that used in traditional anthropological studies. At the same time, continuing memories of terror, persecution and discrimination from the past continue to plague refugees. In this sense, refugees are exposed to multi-layered and multi-located identities, and researching their situation is

important for the field of diaspora studies and how it relates to the field of anthropology. The study of refugees by using anthropological perspectives has become increasingly important and has the potential to contribute significantly to the understanding of human beings in this present “refugee century.”

## References

- Clifford, James. 1994. “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9: 302–338.
- Haines, David. W., ed. 1989. *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in America*. New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Haines, David. W., ed. 1997. *Case Studies in Diversity: Refugees in America in the 1990s*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Hall, Stuart. 1990. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Jonathan Rutherford, ed. pp. 222–237. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Japan Immigration Association. 2006. *Heisei 18 Nenban Zairyu Gaikokujin Tokei* [Heisei 18 Fiscal Year (2006) Statistics on the Foreigners Registered in Japan]. Tokyo: Japan Immigration Association.
- Kato, Takashi. 1994. “Kokumin kokka to nanmin mondai” [Modern nation state and refugee issues], In *Nanmin* [Refugees]. Takashi Kato and Takashi Miyajima, eds. pp. 1–20. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.
- Kawakami, Ikuo. 1999. “Ekkyosuru kazoku: Zainichi Betonamu-jin no network to seikatsusenryaku” [Family crossing borders: Vietnamese and their life in Japan], *Minzokugakukenkkyu* [Japanese Journal of Ethnology] 63(4): 359–381.
- . 2003. “Resettlement and border crossing: A comparative study on the life and ethnicity of Vietnamese in Australia and Japan,” *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 12: 48–67.
- Kibria, Nazil. 1993. *Family Tightrope: the Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Koizumi, Junji and Eisei Kurimoto. 2006. “Hajimenu” [Introduction], *Transnationality studies* 4 (The 21st Century COE Program: Interface Humanities, Research Activities, Osaka University): 3–7.
- Malkki, Liisa. 1992. “National geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7: 24–44.
- . 1995. “Refugees and exile: From ‘Refugee studies’ to the national order of things,” *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* 24: 495–523.
- Safran, William. 1991. “Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return,” *Diaspora* 1(1): 83–99.
- Thomas, Mandy. 1997. “Crossing over: The relationship between Vietnamese and their homeland,” *Journal of International Studies* 18(2): 153–176.
- . 1998. *Dreams in the Shadows: Vietnamese-Australian Lives in Transition*. Sydney: Paul Publications Consortium.
- Viviani, Nancy. 1984. *The Long Journey: Vietnamese Migration and Settlement in Australia*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- . 1996. *The Indochinese in Australia, 1975–95*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.