

BECOMING ADULT

**'Becoming adult by remaining a minor':
Reconfigurations of Adulthood and Wellbeing by young
Vietnamese migrants in the UK**

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**Working Paper - Becoming Adult: conceptions of futures and
wellbeing among migrant young people in the UK**

**Researching young migrants'
uncertain futures**

Introduction

In 1975 images of the Vietnamese 'boat people' captured the main attention of Western media. After 20 years of US struggle in Vietnam, the American–Vietnam War ended after the fall of Saigon and the withdrawal of US troops prompting the exodus of thousands of refugees from Vietnam to countries all over the world. The 'boat people' formed the first wave of refugees who were initially ethnic Vietnamese from South Vietnam facing persecution due to their involvement in the former capitalist regime. The majority of these refugees fled to countries with previous colonial links to Vietnam such as the USA and France. Those coming to the UK however represented quite a different and very specific case in the global spread of Vietnamese refugees. By comparison to the USA, Canada, Australia and France, the social composition and re-settlement experiences of these refugees were quite different; the majority of refugees to Britain were in fact ethnic-Chinese from North Vietnam (62%) who fled the ethnic cleansing that took place after the Chinese invasion of North Vietnam in 1979 (Dalglish 1989). Rather than fleeing in small boats of between 30 – 40 people like the South Vietnamese refugees, those from the North left in large boats of up to 1,000 and were hosted in refugee 'holding' camps in Hong Kong and other countries in Southeast Asia before coming to the West (Hitchcox 1990, Dalglish 1989). A steady flow of Vietnamese refugees continued to arrive in the UK and other Western countries until the early 1980s. Despite this, the Vietnamese community in the UK today still remains a numerically small, culturally and politically invisible minority with a population of 60,635 (ONS 2011). Its fragmented nature due to ideological, regional and ethnic differences has hampered both a sense of Vietnamese identity and strong connection to British society (Barber 2015, Sims 2007). As a 'silent' and often 'invisible' group in Britain the Vietnamese also do not have a prominent position in multicultural society. Unlike other diaspora communities, the UK Vietnamese have not developed a Vietnamese mediascape or a particularly strong identity in Britain, forms of cultural syncretism and hybridity have been slow to take hold (Barber 2015 and 2014).

Return migration to Vietnam of the overseas Vietnamese or *Viet Kieu* from the diaspora has been changing views on migration. In 1994 an increasing relaxation of visa restrictions saw a softening of attitudes in Vietnam towards this group as well as to a range of economic and social contributions they made to the homeland (Pham 2010, Chan and Tran 2011, Chan 2013). In recent years new economic migrants, largely young Vietnamese, arriving in the UK during the past decade in search of better economic futures have done so through 'illegal' routes, largely through profiteering trafficking (UKHTC 2014, CEOP 2009). This group has generally not been accommodated by the established Vietnamese community and is often treated with suspicion for political/ideological reasons (OMI 2006), and newcomers who have been referred to as 'ngươi rom', scarecrows of the cannabis trade. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these migrants are now coming from the poor rural parts of central Vietnam where poverty is

a key push factor (Silverstone and Savage 2010, UKHTC 2010). Furthermore, while earlier waves of Vietnamese refugees to the UK were welcomed with a great deal of sympathy for their political plight (Dalglish 1989), contemporary Vietnamese migration to the UK has been associated with 'illegal economic migration' and has been marred by the particular labour market sectors in the shadow economy which has been specifically related to the Vietnamese such as cannabis farming, money laundering through nail shops and people smuggling/ trafficking (see Silverstone and Savage 2010). This newer migration has been overwhelmingly composed of young people and Children (CEOP 2011, SOCA 2013, US State Report 2015). While young unaccompanied migration to the UK has registered an important concern among immigration and welfare agencies a deeper understanding of some of the cultural narratives shaping why and how this is happening is needed to uncover some of the push and pull factors relevant to young Vietnamese unaccompanied migrants.

This article explores cultural conceptions of 'Migration', 'Becoming Adult', 'Wellbeing' and 'Future' among young Vietnamese migrants while subject to immigration control in the UK. It investigates the norms and ideas represented in the Vietnamese cultural media, to establish the potential impact these have on young people's migratory decisions. Taking a focus upon online media and particularly the role of social media, this article argues that the internet is becoming increasingly important for shaping and forming views about migration, how to succeed as a minor once in the UK and when to 'return'; as issues of particular concern for this group of largely economic migrant Vietnamese youth. It is argued that while young Vietnamese migrants are represented in the cultural media as 'child slaves' and victims forced to work in cannabis farms, research materials show that cannabis farming is often seen as a common route into 'employment' by young people themselves and as a route to becoming adult and developing agency. A brief discussion of cultural conceptions and definitions of adulthood and an overview of the socio-political context of cultural media in Vietnam is given, followed by a discussion of the methodology before moving to a discussion of the main findings.

Vietnamese conceptions of adulthood

In Vietnam, migration is often tied into the transition to adulthood for Vietnamese youth through the process of life events and through the taking on of certain financial responsibilities and notably it is signalled through economic success. For example, many children in rural or mountainous areas in Vietnam have to grow up more quickly to share family and financial responsibilities with their parents (ILO 2014). Statistics from the National Child Labour Survey 2012 suggest that some 1.75 million children in Vietnam are classified as 'child labourers', accounting for 9.6% of the national child population and 62% of children engaged in economic activities (ILO 2014 p.2). Nearly 85% of these children live in rural areas and 60% belong to the 15-17 age group (ibid).

Economic and financial constraints also influence the transition in to adulthood through important life events, such as marriage. Ethnic minorities in remote areas, in particular, still practice underage marriage so the husband's family gains a labourer and the wife's family has one less 'mouth' to feed (Jones et al, 2014). Young people, who, according to different definitions, can be grouped in either 'child', 'youth' or 'adult' categories (or arguably all three), are actively encouraged to migrate. Migration itself is an important life event, so in a sense, these young people are being urged to 'leave' their childhood and transition into adulthood. This non-Western attitude towards childhood and adulthood is clearly featured in the Vietnamese cultural media. Contrary to the Western approaches to child protection and children's rights, which tend to separate economic activities from childhood, Vietnamese practices value and honour the economic contributions made by children.

Vietnamese children reach adulthood on turning 16 years of age (CEOP 2013). However, among the Vietnamese in the UK, notions of childhood, youth and adulthood are often juxtaposed with each other due to the specific context within which they find themselves. In the UK, the Vietnamese notions of adulthood have to be adjusted to suit the purposes of the UK legal and cultural frameworks. The biological age of the Vietnamese migrants is arguably difficult to read in the UK by UK officials and many Vietnamese are able to claim they are younger than they are for the purposes of navigating punitive aspects of the immigration and asylum system. This is a process that has been observed across a number of different groups where migration control authorities often have difficulties verifying claims made by so-called under-aged or minor migrants (see Dorling 2013, Crawley 2007). For the purposes of this article when we talk about adulthood, we will be referring both to the UK/international legal definition as well as common Vietnamese constructs which emerge through the cultural media.

Methodology

The study took a qualitative approach to exploring the Vietnamese cultural media using both qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis. Based upon the assumptions and understandings of the situation of newer migrants in the UK, described above, the research selected material that would be both wide-ranging but also relevant to the target study group of young Vietnamese people subject to immigration control. The source material was selected on the basis that it was either; a) media that was known to be used by the target group or b) media in Vietnam which contained an emphasis on the themes of migration, youth and becoming adult or c) media in the UK relating to the target group. Where possible the selection was made based upon popularity and circulation, for example the time slot in which a programme was shown or the likelihood that young people would consume the media as well as the likely influence on broader society or the extent to which it was felt to reflect dominant

cultural narratives in Vietnam. The research material was drawn from a range of sources including Vietnamese and UK national press (online news media), social media websites, contemporary Vietnamese novels, Vietnamese television shows. The cultural media was analysed first thematically, with the themes 'migration', 'adulthood', 'wellbeing' and 'futures' in mind. Summaries of relevant content and extracts of the material were collected and then sorted into themes. The media was also analysed according to a semiotic analysis, signs and symbols arising in the media relating to the core themes were explored. The native Vietnamese co-author of the report provided translations of Vietnamese cultural idioms and concepts relevant to the themes of investigation.

A range of methodological challenges and limitations confronted the research into cultural media relating to undocumented young Vietnamese migrants. This firstly related to the accessing of material, notably, in relation to social media where undocumented young Vietnamese migrants participation in and consumption of media is difficult to determine. Research into migration and becoming adult through a content analysis of cyberspace such as online chat forum and social media websites also raised issues as to the verification of such posts and the identity of the users. The nature of these platforms allows users to have multiple identities and enables them to present themselves in different ways reducing our ability to verify the age of those who claim to be, under 18; and so part of our analysis is based on unverified information. This limitation applies to analysis on other claims/statements made on website discussions. The difficulty in identifying the real age of these 'children' is also faced by the authorities, and hence representations of child migrants in the press.

The research and analysis was also limited in scope as the authors were only able to capture the responses of Vietnamese migrants using public websites rather than through Facebook or other similar social media channels. Given the popularity of Facebook in Vietnam (VOV 2012), the exclusion of this social networking site may risk excluding the communication between the young Vietnamese and their fellow migrants and those in their homeland. Another methodological challenge that cross-national research such as this one faces relates to location. Specifically, being based in the UK, we do not have access to off-online materials such as printed newspapers and books. Our reliance on the Internet inevitably makes the materials presented in this paper highly selective. The findings below therefore should only be taken as indicative rather than conclusive. Online research, which is essentially what this paper has adopted as its main methodological strategy, also lacks personal interactions between the researchers and the research subjects. This may hinder the possibility of gaining an in-depth understanding of young Vietnamese migrants' transition into adulthood.

Issues of anonymity and identifiability were another important ethical consideration in the research. Given the small number of Vietnamese websites based in the UK, the researchers were conscious of not drawing unwarranted attention to discussion pages containing sensitive and personal information, or compromising the anonymity of web users through the possibility of rendering them identifiable. The sensitive and personal nature of issues discussed online and concerns over possible detection of migrants with

illegal status and criminal activity required the authors to be cautious in naming and identifying certain sources in this article. Since the target research subjects are 'children', although admittedly people featured in our report were usually over 18, such concerns were of even greater importance.

Cultural conceptions of migration: successes and failures

In the 2012 primetime television series *Hai Phia Chan Troi* or *Two Horizons* an emblematic scene plays out between two relatives who are discussing the merits of sending their children abroad to Europe. The mother of Minh (a main character who is a migrant) is trying to persuade an uncle against sending his sons abroad. The uncle, is determined to send his sons to Germany believing that going abroad could make people 'admire his sons' and bring 'pride to the family'. The financial justifications such as the money they could make a month, was seen to make migration an irresistible prospect. Minh's mother on the other hand warns of all the difficulties and challenges one might encounter whilst abroad, explaining that her son had to work very hard to earn money and he was not rich. The uncle insists she is being modest as the 'Viet Kieu' label is synonymous with fortunes and money citing the common refrain: 'if going overseas was so bad, why would people still pay so much to go?' (*Two Horizons*, Episode 7).

Such middle-class aspirations are common in Vietnam and the positions described above represent the two polarised cultural conceptions of migration in Vietnam relating broadly to issues of financial gain and improved status versus those of wellbeing and identity. Across the Vietnamese media these two broad tendencies are represented on the one hand, in positive coverage of 'successful' migrants (often found in documentaries, news coverage and popular novels) which focus on discussions of more privileged forms of migration such as young student migration, successful migrant returnees and the Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) diaspora. On the other hand, there are more negative portrayals which focus on the more 'gritty' realities of migration particularly of the kind related to irregular economic migration, trafficking (more recently contained in social media exchanges and more critically acclaimed novels, TV and films); a mid-way treatment of the topic of migration is more difficult to find.

Stories showcasing success of the Vietnamese abroad and those who have recently returned to Vietnam to live and work are frequently invoked in the Vietnamese press in positive representations of the benefits of successful migration. A privileging of 'hyper-success' (understood in terms of both financial and social esteem markers) and contributions towards Vietnamese society features as a common narrative in stories of young successful Vietnamese overseas. These include headlines such as "Boat People" Return to Vietnam after Finding Success in America" (Tin Moi 2015). Popular Vietnamese media such as *Talk Vietnam*, a well-known talk show broadcasted on VTV1 and VTV4 (Vietnam Television Channel 1 and 4), regularly features interviews with successful *Viet Kieu*, recent examples feature Australian celebrity chef, Luke Nguyen and American Businessman, David Duong whose stories are presented in a way that the

'average Vietnamese' may relate to. Such celebratory stories generally present migration as an easy process and thus reinforce and oversimplify the connection between migration and success.

Fictional stories focusing on positive narratives of successful migration have also been developed in a Vietnamese equivalent of the Mills and Boon style novels (part of a surge of novels and short stories dealing with romantic love in contemporary settings since the mid-1980s, Phan and Pham (2003)). This has generated a sub-genre of fiction which represents a positive and rather idealistic view of migration by prioritising the migration of already privileged and successful individuals. For example, in the novels 'Beloved Oxford' (2011) by Duong Thuy and 'London is Far Away' (2013) by Le Thu Huyen, migration is depicted as a worthy pursuit that is undertaken by brave, hardworking and successful middle-class students with bright futures. In this portrayal, migration is represented as a 'rite-of-passage' (as discussed by Monsutti 2007 and Hagan 2008).. The image of the UK portrayed in these novels are stereotypical, which in turn reinforces popular notions in Vietnam that it (the UK and more broadly, Europe) is a luxurious, exotic and 'heavenly place'.

Such narratives reflect broader societal trends where popular culture in post-doi moi Vietnam has increasingly featured a celebration of economic success and material wellbeing, which is driven by a rising consumerism among the younger generations¹. Although economic growth in Vietnam has engendered a degree of social progress and higher standards of living among certain sections of the population, it has also been seen to engender rampant consumerism, the rise of 'money worship' and a lifestyle driven solely by self-interest and practical considerations (Dang and Pham 2003; 200). This is in part thought to be shaping the cultural conceptions of migration and young people's migratory decisions by emphasising particular push and pull factors. However, it is clear that much of this media can be misleading about the process and outcomes of migration and is likely to have the power to influence young people.. Yet while there is the emergence of the cult of celebrity and a general appetite in Vietnam for the consumption of migration success stories, in recent years, however there is also representation of a more critical stance in Vietnamese society which provides a counter-narrative to success narratives by featuring instead the various struggles and hardship of other migrants.

More negative depictions of contemporary Vietnamese migration (to Europe) are increasingly found in a range of recent media coverage of illegal migration, people trafficking and employment in the illicit cannabis farming industry in the UK. In Viet Press (2015) article headlines such as; *100 illegal Vietnamese migrants in the UK are to be deported* and *Hundreds of Vietnamese migrants have come to the UK illegally or overstayed their visa* have recently found their place. In these articles, factual information is given about changes in UK policy and government declarations of applying tougher rules and deport hundreds of people belonging to this category. In Nguoi Lao Dong (The Labourer) (2015) articles discussing forced labour in cannabis farms in the UK include; *Vietnamese slaves in the UK: Many forced to work in cannabis farms*. Tuoi Tre (The youth) newspaper says *Human Trafficking in the UK* depicting one of the most profitable 'illegal' jobs in the UK is smuggling Vietnamese people to the UK.

Although there is no evidence to indicate how Vietnamese people react to such news, it is important to note that these negative news titles appear much less frequently than the positive ones. In addition, indications across other parts of the cultural media suggest that such stories tend to be overlooked by those Vietnamese who wish to migrate as they are seen as being outweighed by the promise of better financial gain. In such portrayals, a common term to describe young people working in cannabis farms and factories is *ngươi rơm* 'scarecrow' or 'strawman' this has been used to refer to people who watch over cannabis crops and refers in a derogatory way to the lack of agency and powerlessness of the young people filling such a role.

UK press coverage of Vietnamese migrants is also largely negative focusing predominantly on vulnerabilities and forms of exploitation arising through illegal migration. Such news headlines as *Police 'Can't Cope' as Vietnamese Flood Drugs Trade* (Observer 11 September 2005) or *Human Trafficking: 3000 Children enslaved in Britain after being trafficked from Vietnam* (Guardian 24 May 2015) dominate cultural narratives about Vietnamese migrants in Britain and present an overall negative depiction with almost no alternative narrative. While the UK press is likely to be accessible only to those who are already in the UK it is probable that such stories do not reach the attention of young people who are still in Vietnam. A recent UK short film 'The Trip' (Dir. Bailey-Bond, 2013) offers a dramatisation of the stories discussed in these news articles above by portraying the solitude and confusion experienced by Hung, a young migrant, who is betrayed by his traffickers (whom he paid to bring him to find work in the UK) who brought him instead into slavery in a cannabis farm. The film illustrates the difficulties young people like Hung face in the criminal justice system as they are too fearful to reveal the identities of their traffickers for fear of retribution towards their families in Vietnam.

Social media sitesⁱ created for and used by the Vietnamese in the UK also provide a platform for shared experiences around these issues. The contributors to the website often share advice on how to navigate the UK immigration system and share examples of 'stories' they have had to invent in order to be allowed to stay through the asylum seeker system. For example, an enquirer on one of the websites, writing from Vietnam, asks advice about the jobs available to illegal migrants in the UK. The replies are quite frank and revealing of the situation in the UK with one describing in detail which nail shops employ illegal migrants, how much they pay (up to £500 a week) and how to find ways to make extra money or find alternative (often risky) employment to make money fast through the cannabis industry. The post also warns of some of the dangers involved in gang rivalry related to dealing drugs or working in cannabis farms. Such responses depict a reality investigated by Silverstone and Savage (2010) which is shown to offer a range of very specific options for irregular Vietnamese migrants to the UK and delineating less positive outcomes.

Recent Vietnamese fictional media increasingly presents an account of less positive but more realistic 'failure' stories of migration. These might be seen as an attempt to balance the overly positive view of migration, as often presented in Vietnamese news media. The television series, *Two Horizons* (2012) (based on the novel *Blood of Snow* 2006) and the recently adapted novel *Quyen* (2007) to the film *Farewell Berlin* (2015), offer a contrast to the overly simplistic representations of migration found in other news media (discussed above). Here myths of migration and misunderstandings of the immigration controls and systems are expelled by immigrant characters who acknowledge how the foreign office departments of European countries knew more about Vietnam than the Vietnamese refugees initially thought. Specifically there is an acknowledgement that government departments for immigration knew full well that the so called 'political refugees' were really here for economic reasons. A general warning is also contained in these and other novels about how the Vietnamese risk being too easily misguided in their view of the world by the internet and sources which do not reflect reality.

Such a wide range of representations make it hard for young people to reconcile decisions about whether to migrate or not. Positive and negative narratives have an impact on young people to migrate. Here young people are the target of cultural pressures to migrate while at the same time they are caught between social and economic imperatives to find a better life.

Adulthood and becoming adult in the UK asylum system: issues of biological age

Seen as the 'golden egg' for the future, young adolescents and younger family members are actively encouraged to leave their family to go and seek their futures; often to increase the socio-economic prosperity of the family and sometimes to protect children from perceived 'demise' in Vietnam and as a rite-of-passage (*Two Horizons*, *Beloved Oxford*). In the Vietnamese cultural media and the relatively young family members are documented as more likely to migrate, while migration of older family members is often represented as desirable or appropriate given the cultural and social draw to the homeland (seen in *Two Horizons*, *Beloved Oxford*, *London is Far Away*). On the receiving end of this migration, British press coverage of Vietnamese migrants has frequently focused upon stories of children who are trafficked into Britain for the purposes of cannabis farming. Recent headlines in the national press include; 'Why are so many of the UK's missing teenagers Vietnamese?' (BBC 17th June 2013) to 'Vietnam's lost children in labyrinth of slave labour' (BBC 27 August 2013). In these stories, and notably in the story of Hien, featured in *The Guardian* (24 May 2015), childhood seems to end soon after his entry to the UK where he is subject to domestic slavery and even though a child himself, he is tasked with looking after various children which pass through the premises, in the process of being trafficked themselves. Likewise, the character Hung, in the short film *The Trip* (2013), who is 16 years of age is portrayed as reaching adulthood through the key life events of being trafficked and enslaved in a

cannabis farm. Hung begins his journey to adulthood when he takes on responsibility for becoming the breadwinner for his family by travelling to the UK to rescue his parents from destitution. Hung can be seen to have become adult on this difficult journey, having learnt about adult life the hard way through his enslavement in a UK cannabis farm.

Online discussions hosted on one of the UK Vietnamese websites also testify the importance of biological age as a concern for young Vietnamese migrants, especially those trying to become adult through navigating the asylum and care systems in the UK. Age is important and relates to the notion of becoming adult and marks the milestones to responsibility in the UK context. Notably, the biological age categories between childhood and adulthood are manipulated by young Vietnamese migrants as a survival strategy and becoming adult in the UK context (although they have already become adult under Vietnamese cultural constructs) is seen as an undesirable legal transition due to the responsibilities and lack of rights and welfare entitlements that this entails (Coram Children's Legal Centre 2012). In the chat discussions, one contributor explains how s/he has claimed to be 16 in order to be allowed to stay at an asylum home and is now very nervous about having to defend this fabricated story to renew their visa. Responses to this post from fellow Vietnamese youth reveal this to be a common experience and many share stories of their own attempts to manipulate age references in order to secure continued support as a minor. For example, one contributor explains how after being arrested they gave the authorities their real age, 17, and as a minor they were placed in the care of a family, but now they have been 'kicked out' of their temporary guardian's home because the Home Office is challenging their claimed age of 17. In such examples, the process of becoming adult in the UK, in terms of securing a future and opportunities to follow a 'normal' life, is hampered by technicalities surrounding legal status and process that prevent the transition to adulthood in particular legal contexts.

Technical and legal distinctions between age categories are central feature of the discussions and contributors seek advice about their situation and weigh up the wisdom of retaining one immigration story over another. In one online discussion, a contributor asks whether he should declare his real age of 24 rather than 15. The responses that follow detail the various legal loopholes which can be exploited relating to marriage, testimonial rigor and so forth. These are illustrative of people who have also been through a similar experience and exemplify well-worn strategies that are necessary to navigate the restrictive policies of the UK immigration system.

Processes of becoming adult are also shaped by gender and the transition to parenthood emerges as an important concern for young women as the responsibility for a dependent shapes the way in which they conceive of their futures prospects. In one example, a young woman who is seeking asylum and is barely an adult herself (by UK legal terms) describes how on reaching the age of 18 and with a baby has lost her place in social housing (and her school place) and has had her application for asylum rejected but is fearful of returning to Vietnam, What is revealing in the responses by other

contributors that follow is how responsibility and blame are apportioned directly to the young woman which presume the with adult responsibilities she has now become adult rather than being a vulnerable victim of the system. One rather stark comment suggests she must find a way to live and work in the UK illegally because it will be virtually impossible to return to Vietnam as it even more difficult to support herself. Presumably, the shame associated with being returned back to Vietnam and/or returning as a young single mother outweighs the potential penalties of the British legal system. By contrast for young men, the shame of returning home before having become adult, (here read having become a 'breadwinner') is presented in discussions as relating to not being able to support a family, with an emphasis upon returning as a provider. Women, on the other hand appear more easily tarnished by having entered into the wrong relationships, having lost Vietnamese language or becoming a single parent. For young Vietnamese migrants, becoming adult in the UK arguably relates to the acquisition of certain skills and the ability to be savvy in navigating the UK legal system and welfare system in order to use it to enable to make a successful economic life in the UK.

In the responses above, there is a clear indication of a commonly shared problem of age issues and a range of strategies that Vietnamese young people must be aware of in order to navigate categories of childhood and adulthood in the UK. While the category of adulthood in the UK system may be punitive to illegal Vietnamese migrants in the UK, it has no bearing upon their own cultural definitions by which many of these young people have already become adult through the process and journey of their migration.

Wellbeing: shame, honour and acceptance

Conceptions of wellbeing have been understood beyond straightforwardly objective measures pertaining to subjective understandings and as 'relating to the ability to be able to conceive of a project of the self' (Chase 2014). Wellbeing in the cultural media is portrayed as individual subjective and objective states, as well as a collective state with a strong focus on the family. An important connection is drawn between wellbeing and migration and the sense that migration is perceived as leading to a better future in terms of material wealth and other objective measures. Wellbeing at the individual level is represented objectively as the material wellbeing of the individual and the family and subjectively conceived of in terms of identity and belonging (both in Vietnam and abroad).

'Saving face': family shame and honour

The notion of 'saving face' is an important cultural construct in Vietnamese society and is of central relevance in the stories of migrants and especially those perceived as not living up to images of success. In order to secure better futures, characters across a range of the fictional and non-fictional media have to sacrifice the wellbeing of their

families at home in Vietnam in the short-to-medium term which may be understood as being able to develop a project-of-self as a breadwinner (Chase 2013). The problems related with to this are illustrated in a number of storylines where characters confront issues and dilemmas resulting from having borrowed money from families to pay for their migration (often using traffickers to help them), or owing money to money lenders or and having to deal with coping without valuable family members (in Vietnam) or living in fear of what is happening to their family emotionally, financially and socially (dealing with forms of social shame and stigma). In the television series, *Two Horizons*, the character Mich, for example, is disowned by his father for reasons of social shame and financial hardship, and has to work to pay off debts whilst raising two sons on his own. His father believes Mich's wife (Tinh) has cheated on him and taken all the money and will not return and Mich is left to live with the consequences of poverty and shame.

The theme of 'saving face' is also seen in the various strategies engaged in by the characters who must fabricate stories about the realities of their situation to their family members in Vietnam order to save face personally. This strategy enables a superficial preservation of wellbeing both individually (to their families) but also collectively, enabling their families to save face in their local community in Vietnam. Similar strategies have been found among other migrant group (see Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2014). The effects of investing the family's money to send a young family member abroad are illustrated through a range of stories where young migrants who are struggling to pay off their debts are involved in a range of face-saving strategies. This aspect can also be linked to the notion of future and return. Notably, the shame of losing face often seems to prevents people from returning to Vietnam which is a recurrent theme across the fictional media but also a key concern for young people posting on websites

Identity and Belonging: accommodation without assimilation?

A sense of identity and belonging features strongly in representations of subjective wellbeing among Vietnamese migrants outside of their homeland. In the social media, symbolic references are made to the lack of wellbeing experienced by migrants in the UK Vietnamese websites. The frequent appearance of adjectives such as 'sad', 'miserable', 'desperate' in the website users' nicknames signify their general emotional and psychological states and migration status/experience. Some active members use characters' names from Jin Yong's martial arts genre fictions. In particular, one regular contributor takes the name of a hero in 'Thien Long Bat Bo' (a Jin Yong novel), who is the leader of a beggar gang . This choice of name may have a subtle reference to the proverb "tha phuong cau thuc", which translates into English as "leaving one's hometown to beg for food". Given the fact that these migrants have also left their hometown to find work ('work' is still sometimes referred to as 'finding food' in street slangs used by poor/working class people in Vietnam), this particular name may be seen as a way of expressing the migrant's feeling of vulnerabilityⁱⁱ.

Maintaining a Vietnamese identity is a central concern in the cultural media and is linked to a sense of belonging and aspirations to return to Vietnam. This is illustrated in the UK Vietnamese sites by one of the contributors who fears if he stays too long overseas and does not return to Vietnam this might jeopardise a sense of belonging. He writes to another web user "Are you certain that after many years of trying to stabilise your income, you would still be 'Vietnamese' and look towards your country". A concern with roots is reflected in broader cultural narratives in online newspaper coverage of Vietnamese migrants where those who are deemed the most successful are ones who are portrayed as having held on to their Vietnamese 'roots' by either returning back to Vietnam, investing in Vietnam financially or through having retained their mother tongue and culture (e.g. All Vietnam 2015). Fears over children forgetting their mother tongue, and thus their "roots" are also featured in *Quyen* (2007) and *Beloved Oxford* (2012). The expression of sentiments of longing for and belonging to the homeland among the overseas Vietnamese in cultural media has been encouraged and warmly received among the national Vietnamese who have historically had an uneasy political relationship with the Viet Kieu, pre-1990s. This was illustrated through the positive reception in Vietnam of the Viet Kieu song 'Bonjour Vietnam' released in 2006. include the chorus : "One day I'll touch your soil. One day I'll finally know my soul. One day I'll come to you. To say hello... Vietnam." which demonstrate and celebrate a nostalgia for the homeland.

This same notion is also developed in *Beloved Oxford* in which in a cautionary tale is presented by two older migrants who explain how they 'endlessly ponder that we are fallen leaves from the people of our roots' acknowledging the danger of losing touch with Vietnam and their cultural roots which may lead them not being able to 'belong anywhere'. This relates to an old Vietnamese saying that when people become old, they want to return back to their fatherland to live the remainder of their lives and pass away. The notion of ancestral lands and the importance of being buried in the family 'plot' is also recurrent in other novels and is explored in relation to the death of the character Hung in the novel *Quyen*. A similar discussion is found in the Kenh14 online discussions (see Future section) where the contributors contemplate the merits of being able to feel a sense of 'meaning in one's life' which relates to the notion of needing to be able to 'look ones ancestors in the eye and smile and say I haven't disappointed them'. This is symbolic of wider Vietnamese cultural constructions around ancestral roots and the importance of the role of ancestors in judging the acts of the living as a determinant of both individual and collective wellbeing. Such issues may relate to and explain some of the reasons for why cultural hybridity does not seem to be taking place among newly arrived young Vietnamese migrants and lack of assimilation may explain the desire to stay in the UK long term. The focus on not holding cultural hybridity as might be seen in other groups and the lack of possibility to assimilate in the UK.

More generally issues of social integration and Gibson's (1988) notion of 'accommodation without assimilation' characterises depictions of Vietnamese migrant communities in the west. The same process is frequently acknowledged in *Two Horizons* and *Quyen* where the Vietnamese are acknowledged as preferring to 'stick among their own kind' rather than mixing with local western communities (in Germany, Czech and USA). In the novel *Quyen*, the Vietnamese refugee settlement in Goldberg is described as:

"[...] Goldberg was like a Vietnamese village in the middle of Germany. However, it was an isolated village. The villagers refused to integrate with those outside Goldberg. The local authorities and people were not happy with some behaviours of the refugees. They never recycled, were loud and inconsiderate, and respected no laws".

This seems to emerge from a combination of experience of discrimination and their lack of desire to integrate with the local population. Fears over becoming what is termed a '*yellow Westerner*' (physically Vietnamese but culturally western) are explored in *Two Horizons* when one character considers her granddaughter moving abroad and couldn't speak much Vietnamese. Not being able to speak the mother tongue is represented as a loss in Vietnamese identity. Racism and experiences of racism are represented as having a negative impact upon the individual subjective experience of wellbeing. The term 'yellow chink', which is imbued with Orientalist colonial origins overtones is used in *Two Horizons* to position the Vietnamese as unwelcome in the Czech Republic and is symbolic of broader racism towards the Vietnamese in Europe (see for example Barber 2015). An overriding form of racialisation of the Vietnamese in the UK is reinforced by UK press coverage represents the Vietnamese as almost exclusively illegal migrants working in cannabis farms or trafficked into the sex trade via nail salons (see Guardian 2013, 2015, The Telegraph 2013, 2015 The Daily Mail 2005, This is London 2011). Conversely, forms of ethnocentrism are also evident in Vietnamese cultural narratives towards other ethnic groups and represent a form of reverse-racism. In the UK Vietnamese web posts, an illustration of this is revealed through the issue of interracial relationships as exemplified between a Vietnamese girl and an Albanian man. A strong racial prejudice is evident in discussions about the problems with interracial relationships are flagged by other Vietnamese who argue that Albanians are 'never to be trusted' are involved in 'gang criminals' and are 'uneducated' and 'deceptive' people. A similar theme is also taken up in relation to stories of interracial relationships (Beloved Oxford) where western partners are deemed to represent a host of immoral qualities and characteristics.

1.3. Future and 'return'

Social media appears to be playing an increasingly influential role in shaping young people's decision-making about their future and issues of migration and return. Across the social media there are different views and discussions of possible futures according to how this can affect livelihood and identity as well as enhancing or curtailing the possibilities of returning to Vietnam. The issue of 'return' is important in the Vietnamese case as while it is often seen as the ultimate goal of migration projects it can often only be undertaken once certain conditions have been satisfied. Overall in the Vietnamese case, migration is understood and encouraged as being a temporary state.

However in many cases, return in old age is reality and a wish to be buried in Vietnam is seen as a way to maintain connection to ancestors and to roots (see Quyen 2007, Beloved Oxford, UK Vietnamese websites and Kenh14) .

Future

A notable theme in the cultural media is the level of reliance of migrants and prospective migrants upon the internet as a source through which to base their migratory decisions. Possible futures through migration are discussed in the social media where prospective migrants use websites to gain advice to help shape their migratory decisions. In one example, an enquirer writing from Vietnam consults a UK Vietnamese website to ask for advice about sending his/her son to the UK (presumably through organised criminal networks) to study and to be fostered. The enquirer asks about the technicalities involved in sending unaccompanied minors abroad, admissions criteria and the cost of schooling. Subsequent discussions by fellow site users (who all appear to be based in the UK) are sceptical of this decision and challenge the enquirer's motivations for coming to the UK. Instead they recommend staying in Vietnam to get a University degree rather than migrating to the UK. Being confined to unskilled work in the form of working as a nail technician, or in a restaurant or as an au pair, is also seen as a less 'honourable' route. The discussion is very revealing in a number of ways about the perceptions held by prospective migrants and migrants about the future. Firstly, that a Vietnamese parent conceives of a better future for their child by sending them overseas as an undocumented minor as being preferable to them remaining in Vietnam indicates a certain desperation about their life-chances in Vietnam. Second, the willingness of this particular parent to send their son to an unknown country, to the care of unknown foster parents to presumably give the child a better future indicates a level of certainty that migration will be advantageous. A key point raised by other site users relates to the risk of such a strategy, the enquirer seems unaware of/ or unconcerned about the potential danger of trafficking a child abroad. An important myth may be identified here, that sending one's child to Europe will automatically mean they have a better future. The responses in the discussion by contributors, who are currently in the UK, raise the question as to whether living an 'ordinary life' in Vietnam is actually as bad as it is made out to be especially by comparison to the relative options available in the UK. This view which runs counter the representations of successful migration found in the mainstream media earlier in the report

Return

The issue of return is featured strongly in both the Wellbeing and Future themes in the Vietnamese media as returning is seen to present both opportunities and challenges. Views on returning to Vietnam and future consequences following that are

unsurprisingly divided. One discussion on this very topic amongst overseas students about whether they should stay abroad or return to Vietnam has attracted a lot of attention. This discussion is illustrative because although it concerns the views of a relatively privileged group of young people, it nevertheless represents the broader narratives in Vietnamese society (and especially those passed down from parents) about the merits of staying away from Vietnam versus returning and illustrate some different views on how best to 'contribute' to one's community and homeland. A Vietnamese youth news channel website, Kenh 14 (which translates literally as 'channel 14', or 'channel for-teens'), has published two most common yet opposite views from young Vietnamese students abroad. One of the perspectives considers the merits of investing in a future in Europe citing reasons such as lack of corruption and heavy bureaucratic systems, greater opportunities for educational and career development and promotes a more individualistic view (seemingly held by many of the young migrants on the UK Vietnamese websites discussions). The other perspective argues for returning to Vietnam in order to pursue a meaningful life, to make ancestors proud and to protect against losing one's roots and Vietnamese identity if one does not return. This perspective also highlights the myths surrounding claims to better economic stability and prosperity associated with migration which is often stymied by exclusion and discrimination encountered in the host country. This later view, recapitulates story lines of other Vietnamese cultural media that warns against individuals in doi moi society who have let themselves be corrupted by their newly acquired wealth and power. (Dang and Pham 2003 198) resulting in the break-down of family and social relationships runs the risk of impoverishing the spiritual life, and destroying traditional ethical values' (2003; 196). Here one stark example is provided on the UK Vietnamese websites which relates to a Vietnamese migrant who has been in the UK for 10 years and seeks advice on how to return to Vietnam because he has become destitute and remains in a very precarious situation but does not have the English language skills to contact the necessary UK agency. He explains that his visa application has once more been rejected; he has no home, no family, no identification documents. He claims he is very unhappy, his health is getting worse and fears he might faint while working. This exemplifies one of the worst case scenarios of migration to the UK which depicts destitution and desperation.

Although the views presented in the Vietnamese media are varied, the common projection is that future for those who have left their homeland is rather uncertain and capricious. Whilst for some, future promises opportunities, for others, future portends more gloomy possibilities. It is clear from the media representations that to strive for a better future, the migrants have to constantly negotiate compromise or even sacrifice their personal values and/or wellbeing. Their stories and experiences are featured on social media platforms, which in turn influence the future perceptions of national Vietnamese who aspire to go overseas, and subsequently, their migratory decisions.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored the ways in which migration has been represented in the Vietnamese cultural and social media as both a positive and negative phenomenon. Enduring popular representation (in the mainstream press and social media) both over-glorifies and over-simplifies migration leaving other experiences of migration such as more negative experiences; 'sad realities' and misconceptions, to be detailed only in a few and more marginal cultural sources. The social and economic imperative to send young people abroad to achieve material success and contribute to the prosperity of their families and the nation as a whole is an important cultural narrative in Vietnam. Young people are more likely to be encouraged to migrate due to their lack of immediate responsibilities and their presumed ability to adapt and cope more easily with migration and as a rite-of-passage into adulthood. The role of young people as the 'golden egg' for the future is a key cultural construct here, yet, their constrained abilities and often thwarted attempts to control their futures, and successfully navigate immigration controls (as seen in *The Trip*) confronts them with moral, emotional and physical challenges and hardships which are too often overlooked. Notably, the gap between the sending family's expectations and concepts of migration, and that of young person's everyday experiences of migration, often remains a too large to straddle and places pressures upon young people to seek success at all costs. This has a heavy impact upon their sense of emotional, social and psychological wellbeing in the UK.

The internet and social media has provided an important role in shaping and informing young people's decision to migrate, what is notable is the way in which it is used by individuals as source of information (and often misinformation) on important and complex life issues such as for example, young people being encouraged to 'google' whether to stay in the west or return (Kenh 14), prospective migrants were advised to 'google' about life in the UK and the national character of Albanians (UK Vietnamese website). The stories and experiences which are featured on social media platforms are in turn, likely to influence the future perceptions of national Vietnamese who aspire to go overseas, subsequently shaping their migratory decisions.

The process of becoming adult is culturally contextual and Vietnamese and UK constructs of 'adulthood' are commonly at odds with each other in the experiences of young Vietnamese migrants in the UK. Different young migrants (according to their social backgrounds and migration routes) have been represented as experiencing different kinds of transitions to adulthood which depend upon the context of their migration, different markers of /transitions to adulthood will be experienced (personal growth, achievements versus. responsibilities such as parenthood or the loss of

innocence). For 'illegal' Vietnamese migrants, constructions of 'adulthood' relate to legal/ social systems in the UK, which prioritise biological age. For young people this may even result in them seeking to maintain their vulnerability/dependency as a minor in accordance with UK institutional arrangements in order to maximise support and protection. This results in a display of rather strategic forms of agency by these young people.

In the analysis of the cultural media, certain gender differences were also discernible in relation to becoming adult. In our analysis, the nature of the source material did not enable a more focus or sustained analysis of gender and social class differences, for example to discern (in a more nuanced way) the impact of intersecting social differences upon the different resources and trajectories taken up by young migrants. A more nuanced appreciation of social hierarchies would seek to take into account regional differences, ethnic difference, and particular family hierarchies relating to age, class and gender however, given the limitations in the study relating to issues of access and anonymity it was not possible to go beyond this.

Overall the future for those who have left Vietnam under precarious circumstances is represented as uncertain and capricious in the cultural media, and often portends to more gloomy possibilities. Having an uncertain future is likely to lead to negative sense of wellbeing for young migrants. This may be seen especially in the context of Vietnamese society where the predominant cultural narratives tend to link migration with success. In reality, to strive for a better future, inevitably means having to constantly negotiate, compromise or even sacrifice their personal values and/or wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of their families in the short-to-medium term.

With the emergence, and growing acknowledgement, of alternative stories of migration entering in to the mainstream media (particularly with the adaptation of the novel *Quyên* into big budget film 'Farewell Berlin Wall' in June 2015, and the airing of drama series such as *Two Horizons* on primetime television), it is likely that more realistic representations of migration experiences will reach Vietnamese audiences. Certainly, the phenomenon of trafficking is becoming more well known in Vietnam with anti-trafficking billboards warning of trafficking among children (Economist 2015). Given this, it might be useful to establish the extent to which young people are aware of contrasting stories of migration and whether this might be precipitating a change in social attitudes in Vietnam. This could be leading to a deepening of understandings about the lives of young migrants and their acceptance back in to their communities in Vietnam.

This last point relates to the notion of return, we have seen in the social media that many individuals claim they do not want to return to Vietnam due to economic and social considerations. While the ideal future includes a return to Vietnam this is not always possible even when one has become adult. Return is often not possible when future plans do not materialise and there is a risk being rejected by their families when

shame of economic failure or social stigma arises. In some cases, developing (unaccepted) interracial relationships, perhaps becoming a parent abroad and embarking on other alternative lifestyles, may preclude return.

Lastly, the specific pathways for migrants coming to the UK are represented as a destination for those wanting to work in cannabis farming and other parts of the shadow economy. In the social media discussions, three clear routes are presented for Vietnamese migrants 1) work (illegally) in a nail salon 2) work in the cannabis farms or deal drugs 3) work (illegally) as a waiter or au pair. Getting a better understanding of how these employment prospects feature into the migration plans of young people might help to offer insight into the kind of futures they imagine.

Areas for further research/limitations of the research

Important areas for further research might relate to the exploration of the relationship between self-conceptions of adulthood and objective ones, by paying attention to the contradictory needs to perform an identity of childhood in the UK in order to gain agency and fulfil future plans. For example it might be useful to understand, in greater depth, how young people cope with having to maintain different strategies and identities relating to childhood and adulthood when confronted with the UK legal and welfare system, as well as life more generally in the UK (by comparison to their own cultural constructions of adulthood emerging from Vietnam). Another important area for further exploration is the role of established social networks of Vietnamese migrants in the UK, by their hometown. It is also likely that communication, and particular representations of life in the UK among village members, may also work to encourage young people to migrate (even if these form largely misconceptions about what life in the UK is really like). As seen in the report strategies of needing to 'save face' and protect family honour may drive these overly-positive representation of migrating to the UK. These sorts of processes warrant further careful investigation. More research is needed to understand how young Vietnamese people (both in Vietnam and in the UK) actually engage and use cultural and social media in order to evaluate the content it provides for shaping their migration decisions and a sense of wellbeing. An understanding of young people's wider use of social media may also be very informative for understanding how young people cope with the process of becoming adult and develop a sense of wellbeing in the UK.

Although we are aware of the popularity and usership of Facebook among the Vietnamese, and especially those in the UK, we did not find a meaningful way to get access to relevant groups on Facebook to observe and analyse how young people make use of it. This kind of understanding would need to draw upon insight from ethnographic research involving contact with prospective research participants. This, and perhaps the analysis of other social media networks, might be very informative for understanding how young people engage in social networks in the UK, in addition to understanding which kind of narratives have greater influence on their life plans and

sense of wellbeing, while becoming adult in the UK. The gap between the sending family's expectations and concepts of migration, and that of young person's everyday experiences of migration, is an important area for further exploration. This might be important for understanding the pressures placed upon young people and how this impact upon their sense of wellbeing. An important area might be to explore the emotional, social and psychological coping strategies developed by young people reconciling everyday realities with the more mythically derived expectations placed upon them by their families and communities in Vietnam.

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ⁱ For ethical reasons the specific names of the website have not been mentioned in this article to avoid the risk of identifiability of contributors. There have also been concerns among website users that the Home Office might be observing the discussion pages for immigration reasons.

ⁱⁱ For the purposes of anonymity and identifiability this report we will not use the nicknames of the contributors but will where possible indicate what their nickname stood for.