

PHI HONG SU

The Border Within: Vietnamese Immigrants Transforming Ethnic Nationalism in Berlin.

Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022. 226 pages. \$90.00 (hardcover), \$28.00 (paperback), \$28.00 (e-book).

Berlin is perhaps the perfect location to study ethnic nationalism in the Vietnamese diaspora, as this study by the sociologist Phi Hong Su reveals. The once-divided city is symbolic of Cold War divisions. It has also hosted many refugees and immigrants from the likewise once-divided nation of Vietnam. This short yet discerning monograph gives a vivid account of the persistence of divisions—including their subtle impact on social identity and social differentiation among Vietnamese in the diaspora decades after the Vietnam War and the Cold War ended. Su achieves this by engaging in wide-ranging fieldwork, including interviews with dozens of southerners as well as northerners. It is one of the most important monographs on this subject published in the last decade, and it should be read widely.

In chapter 1, Su makes a crucial distinction between nationhood and nationalism: one that relates to the distinction between crossing external and internal borders. Nationhood—more precisely, ethnic nationhood—refers to “people’s subjective sense of belonging,” while nationalism is “the political principle that each nation should have its own state” (7). Nationhood is about having a shared identity in ethnicity, historical origin, and cultural belief, among other things; nationalism is about citizenship and political belonging within the same territory. A shared and deeply felt nationhood, however, does not necessarily translate into a shared

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 18, Issue 3, pps. 154–157. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738.
© 2023 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’ Rights and Permissions website, at <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2023.18.3.154>.

nationalism: hence, the “border within” of the title. In Su’s argument, the border within has existed for a long time among Vietnamese in Berlin, due in no small part to their experiences of border crossing. Even though they crossed borders and then shared the same space in this European capital, the previous borders of their lives in Vietnam did not disappear—rather, the borders continued to shape their perceptions and definitions of one another.

Chapter 2 argues that the border within among Vietnamese in Germany began during the twenty years of division between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Both states claimed to represent all of Vietnam, and both defined citizens in terms of “enemies and patriots.” The RVN sought to distinguish “good” from “bad” northerners, including Catholics and others who moved south in 1954. The DRV did the same regarding “good” and “bad” southerners, including those who were living in southern Vietnam after 1975. An implication of this chapter is that citizens in both states absorbed those distinctions and designations over two decades of national division. Indeed, as Su claims, the distinctions did not desist after the war, while similar distinctions did fade among Germans after reunification. On the contrary, they became further entrenched, especially among southerners whose identities were tied to the RVN and who experienced enormous hardships due to postwar policies in reunified Vietnam. The outcome was divergent beliefs about nationhood: “for northerners, a reunified nation under a communist government” and “for southerners, a morally superior and militarily defeated anticommunist nation in exile” (47).

Chapter 2 is theoretically insightful, but it moves hastily and not always convincingly. Assessing two decades of history in a divided nation in a little more than twenty pages is a tall order. While valiant, the effort is somewhat underdeveloped. It seeks to show that Vietnamese shared a nationalism but “competing” nationhoods as a result of different Vietnamese states imposing loyalty on their citizens. But it does not explain why the citizens were loyal to a particular version of nationhood, leaving an impression that their identities were fully dependent on the state.

In contrast, the remaining chapters do deliver on the promise of the book as “an exercise in analytically informed storytelling” (7). Before 1975, border crossing inside Vietnam led to opposing notions of political identity. This

situation turned more complicated after 1975. Postwar border crossing to Germany saw both contract workers from northern Vietnam as well as refugees from southern Vietnam, many of whom had been northern refugees who moved south in 1954. In Su's analysis, the period 1975–1991, between the end of the Vietnam War and the end of the Cold War, is crucial in explaining further north-south divergences, as well as Vietnamese participation in German society. Border-crossing among Vietnamese was perhaps at its peak during this period: southerners came to West Germany as “boat people” refugees, while northerners came to East Germany and other communist European countries as contract workers and students. By the 2010s, the legally recognized southern refugees believed that they had repaid their moral and economic debts to the German state that had generously received them. They believed, too, that they had integrated appropriately into German society through schooling, work, and applying for new citizenship. At the same time, they considered the contract workers from the north—who saw themselves as participants in socialist internationalism—to belong squarely to the communist camp.

These divisions persisted into the post-Cold War era. Having integrated into German society, southern Vietnamese refugees and their descendants view their northern coethnics as tainted by the failings of communism in the Eastern Bloc as well as by the failures of postwar Vietnam under the Vietnamese Communist Party. Following the sudden collapse of the Eastern Bloc, many northern workers lost their contracts and found themselves engaging in extra-legal measures, including the black market, to remain in now-unified Germany. Southerners interpreted the economic and even social activities of the northerners to be “communist”: that is, they were performed with a mindset of having lived in a communist society. Socialization between southerners and northerners, if not non-existent, was often fraught with moral assumptions. Southerners further designated social issues, including criminal activities, to be “northern problems.” Even the seemingly neutral ground of organized religion was not free of political divergence. Southerners, for example, considered some of the northerners' religious practices at a Buddhist temple in Berlin to be “superstitious.” In these ways, the political border created borders in other realms of social and cultural life.

The book is not without problems. Besides the underdeveloped chapter 2 on divided Vietnam, the author repeatedly mentions the presence of the RVN flag alongside the Confederate battle flag at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. This discussion lacks adequately nuanced insight, particularly given the complex history of the RVN flag in postwar history. Su is careful to qualify the comparison in terms of “echoes” of the subject of her book. Nonetheless, this reviewer thinks that a more judicious and apt comparison would be between the RVN flag and the current flag of Vietnam among different Vietnamese groups in the diaspora. Before the pandemic, there were a number of protests against China organized by southerners and northerners in Germany and other European countries, and each group flew a different flag. An analysis of these flags would be more fruitful than grouping the RVN and Confederate flags together because there were also many other flags at the US Capitol that day. Another issue, indeed, is a complete lack of information about opinions on China among southerners and northerners. An analysis of these opinions may show a greater ideological unity among different Vietnamese groups, even as they might persist in drawing distinctions regarding social and moral qualities of one another.

These criticisms aside, *The Border Within* is thoughtfully conceptualized and demonstrated through an abundant amount of fieldwork. It opens a new vista in the scholarship of the Vietnamese diaspora, which has largely studied Vietnamese in a Western country or Vietnamese in a former communist country. Su’s study of two groups of Vietnamese advances scholarship by showing the pluralism of this diaspora in regard to ethnic nationalism and beyond.

Tuan Hoang, Pepperdine University