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Bazaar pagodas in Berlin.

Gendered religious identities among
Vietnamese Migrant Women



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Abstract

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakdown of the East German Socialist government, thousands of former contract workers stayed in the then reunified Germany. Due to their resulting precarious economic situation, a large number of Vietnamese migrants, all former contract workers, became engaged in small business and petty trade. Some of them, women in particular, have become successful entrepreneurs and wholesalers in recently built bazaars in East Berlin. Most interestingly, parts of these urban spaces, former industrial areas on the periphery of Germany's capital, have been transformed into religious places.

This paper explores the formation of Vietnamese Buddhist networks on the grounds of Asian wholesale markets in the eastern part of Berlin after the reunification of Germany. By considering the tensions between Vietnamese former contract workers and the political “other”, the Vietnamese boat refugees in West Berlin, the first part of the paper deals with the arrival of different groups of Vietnamese in socialist East Germany. Based on recent ethnographic fieldwork among female lay Buddhists, the second part focuses on trading women and investigates the relationship between business and religion in the bazaar. The paper explores how gender roles are shaped by geographical mobility and argues that female religious practitioners engage with the places where they live and work, namely the bazaar.

Author

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

This contribution explores religious practices and religious place-making² among Vietnamese Buddhist believers in Berlin, Germany. In particular, it looks at the construction and reproduction of gender roles and asks why so many women, about more than two-thirds of them compared to men, are engaged in visiting pagodas and other Buddhist places of worship in the diaspora. Further, it looks at how religious practices are connected with the history and experiences of migration. It seeks to understand different groups of migrants from one country, namely Vietnam, and its different groups of migrants to Germany. This essay focuses in particular on Vietnamese Buddhist women in Germany's capital, as they form the majority of Vietnamese Buddhist practitioners in Berlin.

Notably, this contribution focuses on the intersection of gender, place-making, religion and politics in the production of diasporic religious identities in a particular locality, namely the bazaar. It seeks to understand the importance of these interdependencies for the travelling of religious experts from Vietnam to the Berlin, and for political tensions among Vietnamese boat refugees and Vietnamese contract workers in Germany's capital, and it ventures to investigate religious emplacement as a contested process in the urban area. In particular, it questions the shifting gender roles of Buddhist Vietnamese women in reunited Germany.

1 R.S. Warner, 'Immigration and Religious Communities in the United States' in R.S. Warner and J.G. Wittner (eds.), *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press 1998, 3.

2 T.A. Tweed. *Crossing and Dwelling. A Theory of Religion*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2006. D.Garbin and M. A. Vásquez , ' "Sacred Connections." Religious Spaces, Transnational Communication and the Congolese Diaspora' in L. Fortunati, R. Pertierra, R. and J. Vincent (eds.), *Migrations, Diaspora and Information Technology in Global Societies*, New York: Routledge 2012, 156-71.

Religion, Migration, and Gender

Many scholars increasingly recognise that religion thrives precisely because globalisation provides useful tools for religious actors and organisations.³ This is remarkable in particular with regard to travelling spirits, mobile believers, and sojourning religious experts.⁴ Fluid transnational networks help to project religious messages from the local to the global.⁵ The emerging literature on the importance of religion, globalisation, and migration,⁶ on religion and transnationalism,⁷ on gender and migration,⁸ and on gender, religion, and

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- 3 B. Meyer, 'Pentecostalism and Globalization' in A. Anderson, M. Bergunder, A. Droogers and C. van der Laan (eds.), *Studying Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, Berkeley: California University Press 2010, 113-131; J. Robbins, 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity' in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), 117-143; G. Hüwelmeier and K. Krause (eds.), *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities*, Oxford/New York: Routledge 2010. Vásquez, Manuel A. and Marie Friedmann Marquardt, eds. 2003. *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the Americas*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
 - 4 G. Hüwelmeier, 'Moving East. Transnational Ties of Vietnamese Pentecostals' in G. Hüwelmeier and K. Krause (eds.), *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities*, Oxford/New York: Routledge 2010, 133-144.
 - 5 T. Csordas, 'Introduction. Modalities of Transnational Transcendence' in *Anthropological Theory* 7:3(2007), 259-272.
 - 6 G. Hüwelmeier, 'Socialist Cosmopolitanism Meets Global Pentecostalism. Charismatic Christianity among Vietnamese Migrants in Germany' in N. Glick Schiller, T. Darieva and S. Gruner-Domic (eds.), "Cosmopolitan Sociability. Locating Transnational Religious and Diasporic Networks", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Special Issue 34:3 (2011), 436-453; G. L.A.T. Bonifacio and V. Angeles, 'Introduction' in G.L.A.T. Bonifacio and V. Angeles (eds.), *Gender, Religion and Migration: Pathways of Integration*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2010, 1-16; A. Stepick, T. Rey and S.J. Mahler, eds., *Churches and Charity in the Immigrant City: Religion, Immigration and Civic Engagement in Miami*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2009; P. Levitt, *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape*, New York and London: The New Press 2007.
 - 7 S. Hoerber Rudolph, 'Introduction: Religion, States, and Transnational Civil Society' in S. Hoerber Rudolph and J. P. Piscatori (eds.), *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1997, 1-24; H.R. Ebaugh and J. Saltzman Chafetz, eds., *Religion Across Borders*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press 2002; Hüwelmeier, 'Moving East'; N. Glick Schiller, T. Darieva and S. Gruner-Domic, 'Defining Cosmopolitan Sociability in a Transnational Age. An Introduction' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34:3 (2011), 399-418.
 - 8 L. Ryan, 'Transnational Relations: Family Migration among Recent Polish Migrants' in *International Migration* 49:2 (2011), 8-103; S.J. Mahler and P. Pessar, 'Gender Matters: Ethnographers Bring Gender from the Periphery toward the Core of Migration Studies'

cross-border ties,⁹ sheds new light on these networks and flows. As for the transnational connections of migrants, specifically those involved in creating and maintaining cross-border relationships, scholars have only recently begun to pay attention to religious networks spanning geographical and cultural borders.¹⁰

This article will focus on female Buddhist believers who came to East Germany as contract workers from Vietnam, yet it includes experiences of Vietnamese boat refugees as well. When former contract workers arrived in East Germany from the early 1980s onwards, based on bilateral agreements between two socialist countries, they did not gather for religious purposes, as they came from a communist country where religion did not play an important role in peoples' lives at that time. Only after the fall of the Berlin Wall did a number of Vietnamese begin gathering in Buddhist networks. Meanwhile, these migrants transgress local, regional and transnational borders, maintaining social, economic and religious ties across continents. This raises the question whether gender roles are shifted, negotiated or reproduced as a result of this movement. What impact does the history of migration have on gendered religious identities? Geographical mobility already shaped gendered religious identities in former centuries, in particular in the 19th century, when millions of migrants moved to the United States. As I have discussed elsewhere, Catholic nuns were pioneers in following these migrants and in organising their religious lives across borders as early as 150 years ago.¹¹ In the past, religion generated mobility in a different way, compared to the 21st century, in which, for example, Vietnamese women

in *International Migration Review* 40:1 (2006), 27-63; K. Willis and B. Yeoh (eds.), *Gender and Migration*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar 2000.

9 G. Hüwelmeier, 'Global Sisterhood: Transnational Perspectives on Gender and Religion' in A. Braude and H. Herzog (eds.), *Religion and Politics: Untangling Modernities*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009, 173-190; G. Hüwelmeier, 'Formations of the Religious Self – Becoming “Women in Christ” in a Globalizing World' in H. Bock, J. Feuchter and M. Knecht (eds.), *Religion and Its Other: Secular and Sacral Concepts and Practices in Interaction*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag 2008, 199-211. G. Hüwelmeier (with Kristine Krause), 'Introduction' in G. Hüwelmeier and K. Krause (eds.), *Traveling Spirits. Migrants, Markets, and Mobilities*, Oxford/New York: Routledge 2010, 1-16. G. Hüwelmeier, '“Our future will be in India”. Traveling nuns between Europe and South Asia.' In: Ester Gallo (eds), *Migration and Religion in Europe. Comparative Perspectives on South Asian Experiences*. Ashgate (Forthcoming).

10 Hüwelmeier, 'Socialist Cosmopolitanism Meets Global Pentecostalism'; Hüwelmeier, 'Moving East'; D. Garbin and M. A. Vásquez, '“Sacred Connections.” Religious Spaces, Transnational Communication and the Congolese Diaspora' in L. Fortunati, R. Pertierra, R. and J. Vincent (eds.), *Migrations, Diaspora and Information Technology in Global Societies*, New York: Routledge 2012, 156-71.

11 Hüwelmeier, 'Global Sisterhood.'

in Pentecostal networks now become mobile believers by joining transnational churches.¹²

Based on anthropological fieldwork among Vietnamese migrants in Berlin¹³ and in Hanoi, in this article I will examine migrants' religious experiences mainly in the receiving country, although they simultaneously maintain social and religious ties¹⁴ in both, the sending and the receiving country. While global processes and the liberalisation of the socialist economy in Vietnam in the past two decades have deeply informed the revitalisation of religious practices in Vietnam,¹⁵ these processes had an impact on the Vietnamese diaspora as well.¹⁶ The flow of remittances between sending and receiving countries such as Czech Republic and Vietnam, Germany and Vietnam, the emergence of consumer culture in Vietnam, and the desire to access consumer goods, are just some of the reasons for the increasing economic and religious activities in Vietnam and corresponding diasporic networks.

In order to understand the diversity of Vietnamese religious place-making in the diaspora, I will first explore different groups of Vietnamese migrants in the two Germanys. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, i.e. the unification of the former socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the religious landscape among Vietnamese migrants changed significantly. Already in 1978, a small group of Vietnamese students began gathering in a small apartment for Buddhist meditation in Hannover, a city in the northern part of West Germany. After the arrival of thousands of Vietnamese boat people in the FRG (from 1979 onwards), a former factory hall in an industrial area in Hannover was inaugurated as a religious place of Buddhist worship in 1981. Over the next decade, a number of Buddhist places of worship were founded in other West German cities. Buddhist worshippers in West Berlin transformed an apartment into a place of worship in 1987, and since 1998 this group has been meeting in a house with a

12 Hüwelmeier, 'Socialist Cosmopolitanism Meets Global Pentecostalism'; Hüwelmeier (with K. Krause), 'Introduction.'

13 This paper is based on my ongoing research project 'The Global Bazaar', funded by the German Research Foundation (HU 1019/3-1), and on my former research project on 'Transnational Religious Networks' (HU 1019/2-1 and HU 1019/2-2). The current project is affiliated with the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Department of European Ethnology.

14 N. Glick Schiller et al, 'Defining Cosmopolitan Sociability in a Transnational Age.'

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

16 Hüwelmeier, 'Socialist Cosmopolitanism Meets Global Pentecostalism.'

garden¹⁷ in a purely residential area in the western part of the city. In 2006, a former office building in western Berlin was transformed into a pagoda.

No such places existed in East Berlin. Interestingly, religious activities were not part of former contract workers' lives until the 1990s, when many of them became small entrepreneurs. They then created altars (*ban tho*) in shops, snack bars, and restaurants all over Berlin, venerating spirits and asking for the protection of the territory of shops and the well-being of the owners.¹⁸ These altars first emerged in the eastern part of Berlin, but can now also be seen in the western part of the city, as some of the Vietnamese former contract workers from the east are now moving to western areas of the city.

Likewise, Vietnamese women's practices in the pagodas are connected with business activities, as a number of the laypeople are businesswomen, who visit the pagoda for purposes of good luck and economic success. I will explore Buddhist Vietnamese in Berlin by focusing on new places of worship, namely the *bazaars* located in former urban industrial areas of eastern Berlin, as these are the places where many businesswomen are engaged in trading.

Different Groups of Vietnamese Migrants in East Germany

To date, little is known about the *socialist pathways of migration*, in particular about people from Vietnam to East Germany.¹⁹ For this reason, I will explore the various groups of migrants arriving in the GDR in different decades. The current discourse about Vietnamese in Germany still refers to “the Vietnamese community”, a term that assumes there is a single homogeneous group of Vietnamese with one distinctive culture in eastern Germany, but it is now time to refine the research lens to take into account the diverse groups of migrants from Vietnam who entered the GDR at different times, with different objectives and in different places.

17 M. Baumann, *Migration-Religion-Integration. Buddhistische Vietnamesen und hinduistische Tamilen in Deutschland*, Marburg: Diagonal Verlag 2000, 73.

18 G. Hüwelmeier, ‘Spirits in the Market Place of Vietnamese Migrants in Berlin’ in M.P. Smith and J. Eade (eds.), *Transnational Ties: Cities, Identities, and Migrations*, CUCR book series, Volume 9, 2008, 131-144. See also A.M. Leshkovich, ‘Women, Buddhist, Entrepreneur: Gender, Moral Values, and Class Anxiety in Late Socialist Vietnam’, in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1:1-2 (2006), 277–313. 293.

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

Taking debates on diversity and super-diversity²⁰ as my point of departure, I will mention various groups of migrants from Vietnam to East Germany, which took place between the 1950s and the late 1980s. Based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in Berlin and Hanoi from 2004 onwards, this paragraph argues that the distinct groups of migrants in the socialist period generated a variety of experiences for Vietnamese in the GDR. Moreover, the transnational connections fostered and maintained by Vietnamese migrants in the socialist past contributed to the strengthening of economic and social ties across socialist borders. These relationships still exist to this day between people in former East Germany and Vietnam as well as between people in other former socialist countries, such as the Czech Republic, and Vietnam.²¹ Cross-border connections established during the Cold War became extraordinarily significant after 1989, when tens of thousands of Vietnamese contract workers lost their jobs and housing in the GDR and large numbers of Vietnamese from former eastern bloc countries entered reunified Germany as asylum seekers or as irregular migrants. Here they settled beside former refugees from Vietnam, who had arrived in West Germany as *boat people* in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

I distinguish mainly three groups of Vietnamese entering East Germany at different times. The first group is known as *the Moritzburger*, a group of children who arrived in Vietnam's socialist brotherland, the GDR, in 1955. They spent most of their childhood and youth in the GDR during the time shortly after North Vietnam was successful in the anti-colonial war against France. They returned to Vietnam and became quite influential in politics and sciences. A second larger group of Vietnamese in East Germany was made up of students, who left Vietnam during the American-Vietnamese War in the late 1960s and early 1970s. After their return to Vietnam, a number came back to the GDR in the late 1980s as interpreters for thousands of contract workers. Finally, the third group refers to the mass migration that started in the 1980s, when the economic situation in socialist Vietnam worsened and the GDR was in need of contract workers from other countries. Most of the students and contract workers were children of cadre families or were organised in the youth organisations of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I cannot go into detail here concerning political issues and practices of everyday life, such as how internationalist solidarity was conceptualized and how it was performed. As I have argued elsewhere, political gatherings and meetings with migrant workers from other socialist countries such as

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

21 Hüwelmeier, 'Socialist Cosmopolitanism Meets Global Pentecostalism'.

Cuba and Angola, official festivities, parties in the dormitories, and other activities were heavily controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnamese embassy in the GDR.²²

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

Another group of Vietnamese, the boat refugees, who might be conceptualized as the “political other” of contract workers, arrived in Germany more than 30 years ago. The boat refugees left Vietnam after the American-Vietnamese War, for either economic or political reasons. The boat people were treated as refugees and received temporary residence permits, which were later changed into permanent residence permits. They participated in language courses and received assistance in finding jobs. Some scholars have labelled them privileged refugees²³ because they received preferential treatment compared with other refugees. Boat people also had the right to family reunification. By contrast, contract workers in the GDR were not allowed to bring along spouses or children. The contrasting treatment of Vietnamese refugees in West Germany and Vietnamese former contract workers in East Germany and the resulting differences in their legal, economic, and social situations in reunified Germany still shape the relationships between these groups to this day. With the renewed popularity of Buddhism in Vietnam as well as in the Vietnamese diaspora, boat people and former contract workers encounter each other in Buddhist places of worship, making pagodas sites in which tensions between the two groups are negotiated.

Vietnamese Buddhist Pagodas in Berlin

The first Buddhist pagoda in Berlin was built by Vietnamese boat people in a middle-class neighbourhood in the western part of the city. According to the female leader of the pagoda, a Buddhist nun from Ho Chi Minh City whom I met in 2007, there

²² Hüwelmeier, ‘The “Children of Uncle Ho”’.

²³ See Baumann, *Migration-Religion-Integration*, 34.

was a group of Vietnamese refugees in West Berlin who founded a “mini-pagoda” as early as 1984. They rented an apartment and founded a place of worship where they could venerate Buddha and perform religious practices such as making offerings and praying. Only in the 1990s did they begin gathering in a small house with a nice garden in Berlin-Spandau, located in a purely residential area, very close to the former border of the city and thus quite far away from the city centre.

The Linh Thuu pagoda in western Berlin is part of a Buddhist Vietnamese network in western Germany,²⁴ with a number of places of worship located in big cities, such as Hamburg or Munich. The most famous is the Vien Giac pagoda in Hannover, one of the largest Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas outside of Vietnam, built between 1989 and 1993 for about 9 million Deutschmarks (4,5 Mio euro), based on donations. When I first visited the Linh Thuu pagoda in western Berlin in 2007, there was, according to the female leader, who is a Buddhist nun, no such place of worship in the eastern part of Germany. This was one of the reasons why so many former contract workers came from other regions in eastern Germany to visit the Linh Thuu pagoda. After the Buddhist nuns purchased a new estate in 2006, more Vietnamese came to visit the pagoda.

During our encounter, the female leader of the pagoda reported the tensions and difficulties she experienced among Buddhist believers in West and East Berlin. She pointed to the suffering of the boat people, who had lost their homes and their friends and relatives. This is the reason, she continued, “why many of them feel bitter towards the communist regime, and they carry a burden. They made too many losses with regard to children, relatives, and money on the boat. So they feel more bitterness in their souls compared to people still living in Vietnam”, and compared to the former contract workers in Germany. She was able to assess the degree of bitterness as she regularly travelled to Vietnam, visiting a partner pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City for about three months a year, then returning to live in Berlin for nine months.

She also noted that far more former contract workers were visiting the pagoda in 2007, compared to a decade before. “Because Vietnamese from here [in western Berlin] have a more regulated life, so they come only then and now to visit the pagoda. However, life in eastern Berlin is more difficult, many Vietnamese live without documents, they have a lot of difficulties and so they come quite often to this pagoda, hoping their wishes will be fulfilled.” As Vietnamese boat refugees form the founding generation of the West Berlin pagoda, some are still quite active today, visit-

24 Baumann, *Migration-Religion-Integration*, 76.

ing the place of worship nearly every day. These believers are viewed differently by other visitors to the pagoda, such as by a female Buddhist practitioner, a former contract worker from the East, whom I met in 2012. She commented: “They [the boat refugees] are sitting around the whole day, while we [former contract workers] donated all the money for building the new pagoda.” Perceiving herself and others from the socialist period as hard workers and generous donors, who cannot visit the pagoda regularly due to their work obligations, she employed stereotypes, depicting boat refugees as not being hard working people, and on the contrary, many being dependent on the German welfare state, she claimed. As these statements demonstrate, political issues are part of religious identities, even 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Gendered Religious Identities

Visitors of the new bazaar pagodas are mostly female traders, living and working in the eastern part of Berlin, the majority of them in their 40s and 50s. During our encounters in the Asia Pacific Center, one of the two big wholesale markets run by Vietnamese, they reported that they were happy to have a pagoda on the grounds of the bazaar, as they could pray any time they want and participating in rituals organized by the pagoda on special occasions. A growing number of female traders are divorced and have to take care for their children. Some of them have turned to Buddhism to find support in dealing with emotional and economic matters. A monk living in the temple located on the grounds of the Asia Pacific Center told me that most women who visit this pagoda have marital problems. As he is specialized in “Buddhist” counselling, in particular in marriage counselling, his aim is to bring together the wife and the husband by not talking about past experiences, but by focussing on the positive character of the respective other.

A new pagoda group was founded on the grounds of the Dong Xuan Center, the biggest market run by migrants from Asia in the eastern part of Berlin, in 2011. The following case study illustrates how a Vietnamese woman, a former contract worker in the Soviet Union, found her way to Buddhism and to the new bazaar pagoda group in Berlin, thus combining religious and economic purposes.

Irregular Female Migrants – Marriage for Documents

Irregular migrants from Vietnam in Germany experience tremendous hardship. Some of them seek advice from the Catholic Church, while others join Pentecostal Charismatic Churches²⁵ in order to get through traumatic experiences. The narrative of Mrs Huong illustrates the sorrows of an irregular migrant, and the disappointments of a single mother of two children in Berlin. She first came into contact with Vietnamese Buddhists in Germany when she was visiting a relative in the 1990s. Her sister was living near Hannover, where the Vien Giac pagoda is located. This place is connected with the pagoda in West Berlin, and Mrs Huong has been participating in ceremonies in Berlin for the past 15 years. However, since 2011, she has been participating in rituals and teachings held in the newly built place of Buddhist worship in the Dong Xuan Center, a huge bazaar in eastern Berlin that opened in 2006. This locality is mainly run by Vietnamese who were former contract workers in socialist East Germany. Thus Mrs Huong may be considered a boundary-crosser, as Vietnamese “normally” join the pagoda either in the west or in the east, depending on where they live and whom they know personally among that community.

I met Mrs Huong in her nail studio in Berlin in 2012. Born as one of seven children in Hanoi in 1960, Mrs Huong was working as a journal editor in Hanoi at the beginning of the 1980s. Although she had a university degree as an engineer, she was not working according to her degree. This was quite common for many young people at that time.²⁶ The American War in Vietnam had ended in 1975, when Mrs Huong was 15, and in the years after, life was quite hard in reunited Vietnam. Those who had the chance of attending university rarely found a proper occupation after obtaining a diploma. Poverty existed all over Vietnam, particularly before *doi moi* (the economic reform era starting in 1986). Therefore it was a big chance for young people to go abroad and it was prestigious to be “delegated” to a foreign country to work and earn money. In 1987, Mrs Huong left Vietnam and travelled to the Soviet Union, where she worked as a contract worker and was a “group leader” for Vietnamese workers, many of whom had high school diplomas or university degrees. After the fall of Communism, a number of Vietnamese left the Soviet Union to travel further west, such as to Poland, the Czech Republic or East Germany, those countries who were considered Vietnam’s “socialist brotherlands”.

25 Hüwelmeier, ‘Moving East’.

26 Hüwelmeier, ‘The “Children of Uncle Ho”’.

The networks of co-ethnics established by Vietnamese in various socialist countries were still in existence in the 1990s, despite the fact that people had not had personal contact for years. Mrs Huong received an “invitation” from somebody in Germany, so she went to the German embassy in Moscow to ask for a tourist visa. One condition was that she had to provide proof of possessing a certain amount of money, depending on the number of days she wanted to visit Germany. She received a tourist visa for five days, left the Soviet Union and arrived in Berlin. She immediately applied for asylum and was transferred to a small town near the Polish border, to live in a home for asylum seekers. From there she was transferred to Cottbus, a town in eastern Germany, where she met her partner, a Vietnamese asylum seeker himself. She became pregnant and her first child was born in 1994, and a second child followed in 1996. When her second baby was one year old, the father returned to Vietnam, as he was rejected as an asylum seeker. As they were not married, there was no divorce. Shortly afterwards Mrs Huong looked for a German spouse so as to not be rejected as an asylum seeker and to have the chance of receiving a residence permit. A German friend helped her place a partner search announcement in a Berlin newspaper. That is how she met Mr Meier, a German, whom she married. From the very beginning, she reported, the marriage for her was just for documents, a *Scheinehe*, a marriage of convenience, and not a “real” partnership. However, her husband had different expectations. This was a tough time for Mrs Huong, as she had a lot of stress in her relationship, not least due to the fact that Mr Meier was an alcoholic. Finally they divorced after five years.

During these years, Mrs Huong visited the Linh Thuu pagoda on a regular basis, as she had a lot of stress. Later, Mrs Huong sold her mobile snack bar and opened a nail studio in a middle-class neighbourhood in the western part of Berlin. Some years ago, when she started her business, it went well; yet, nowadays there are not so many clients, so she decided to offer massages as well as tailoring. Her children are doing very well at school and she is quite proud of them. She told me that she acquired her certificate to run a nail studio in the Dong Xuan Center, the biggest Asian trade centre in eastern Berlin, which opened its doors in 2006. She paid five hundred euro for three months, and acquired most of her knowledge from a Vietnamese woman from the US, who was visiting the Dong Xuan Center.

In early 2012 Mrs Huong participated in a Buddhist gathering inside the Dong Xuan Center. She was distributing leaflets advertising her nail studio, where I visited her later. Mrs Huong had arrived with a friend, and both reported that they visit the pagoda in western Berlin as well. She had heard about the Buddhist gathering in the

bazaar because she comes to buy part of her equipment for the nail studio in the Dong Xuan Center on a regular basis.

A small number of predominantly female Vietnamese Buddhists started gathering in this place only recently, in 2011. Once in a while they invite monks from Vietnam, who perform rituals, preach, teach and give blessings. Donations are collected in order to finance travel expenses and food for the monks and to send the money to charity organisations in Vietnam, such as supporting victims of natural disasters. Mrs Van, a businesswoman herself, and female leader of the Buddhist lay group in the Dong Xuan bazaar, welcomed several monks from Ho Chi Minh City as well as a number of very important people to participate in the gathering. She introduced the male manager of the Dong Xuan Center, who donated a large sum of money, as well as a representative of the Vietnamese embassy in Berlin who gave a short speech. A media team was present as well. ICT networks (information communication technology) and cameras are used widely in spreading religious messages and reports from mass events across continents.²⁷ Finally, some people participating in the ceremony were businesswomen from the Dong Xuan Center and from small shops in other places, such as Mrs Huong, the owner of the nail studio.

Another religious gathering in the bazaar took place some months later, in April 2012. Invitations were circulated in the Dong Xuan Center as well as in the shop of Mrs Van, the leader of the bazaar Buddhist group. During my visits to her shop in the bazaar, she repeatedly asked me and my assistant to bring along other people, as the group is in need of donations, which, as she reported, will be transferred to orphanages in Vietnam and will also be distributed among charity organisations working with handicapped people. The ceremony took place in a dancing hall, obviously a multifunctional space, with mirrors on the wall. At the front of the room, separated by a curtain, an altar with a Buddha statue had been built. When I arrived, people in the dancing school were still practising. Very quickly, some people participating in the dancing lesson were transformed into helpers for the Buddhist ceremony.

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

While religion is not always a matter of boundary crossing, in some cases it is a marker of creating boundaries.²⁸ When I asked Mrs Van, the businesswoman and founder of the Buddhist circle in the Berlin bazaar, whether she also visits the pagoda in the western part of Berlin, she answered: “We [former contract workers] would never go there, as they [boat refugees] fought against our government.” Although her statement might be an exception or an exaggeration, it should be considered a way of generating stereotypes and creating boundaries between Vietnamese migrants.

Conclusion

While the dominant scholarly narrative construes female migrants as exploited workers,²⁹ this case study has illustrated that overseas female migrants create alternative spaces of piety and worship. For most of these migrants, religion is not so much about maintaining the continuity of faith in the diaspora, as they found their way to religious gatherings only after migration. Thus, for many of them, visiting Buddhist places of worship, participating in rituals and donating money in the diaspora is strongly connected with family issues, health and economic success. Quite a number of Vietnamese Buddhist laywomen, former contract workers, are engaged in the wholesale and retail sector, while others run small restaurants or nail studios. Similar to religious practices in Vietnamese Pentecostal networks, characterised by the “health and wealth gospel”,³⁰ migrant women in Buddhist networks pray for money, luck and well-being. However, different from Vietnamese catholic or Pentecostal places of worship in Germany, female Buddhists in the diaspora engage with the places where they live and work: the bazaar.

The formation of Vietnamese Buddhist places of worship in the bazaar is a recent phenomenon in the diaspora in Germany. Yet, similar to the Berlin bazaar pago-

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

29 M. Johnson and P. Werbner (eds), ‘Diasporic Encounters, Sacred Journeys: Ritual, Normativity and the Religious Imagination among Asian migrant Women.’ *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 11: 3-4 (2010).

30 G. Hüwelmeier, ‘Female believers on the Move. Gender and Religion in Vietnamese Pentecostal Networks in Germany’ in G.L.A. T. Bonifacio and V. Angeles (eds.), *Gender, Religion and Migration: Pathways of Integration*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2010, 115-131.

das, religious place making of former contract workers in ex- “socialist brotherlands” happens as well in the big marketplaces run by Vietnamese in Warsaw and Prague, as I am actually realizing in my ongoing fieldwork in Poland and in the Czech Republic. Religious activities in the former socialist part of Germany, namely in the eastern part of Berlin, and in other post-socialist countries in Europe, are intrinsically interwoven with the transformation from socialism to capitalism. Likewise, the religious revival in contemporary Vietnam and its integration into a global capitalist system is intimately linked to economic changes and the emergence of new patterns of consumption.