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# In Search of a Vietnamese Buddhist Space in Germany

Tam T. T. Ngo and Nga T. Mai

## Introduction

This chapter attempts to capture the contesting and contradictory migration categories by examining the different Vietnamese migrant groups in Germany. Vietnamese boat refugees, Vietnamese contract laborers, and other Vietnamese migrants are regularly distinguished from one another on the ground of their political background, migration routes, and integration experience. This distinguishing encapsulates the division that has begun from Vietnam as the war and historical legacies. The main argument is that all these people have left Vietnam, but have not left it behind. Vietnam, as the country of origin, still looms large not only in an imaginative sense but also in a direct political sense. One could call this the enigma of arrival, that one never fully arrives and that many of the troubles that make one move to another country keep following the migrant. This enigma of arrival is addressed by Buddhism both in a religious and in a political sense. Buddhism in Germany has become a major site of contesting people's relation to Vietnam. This chapter starts with a description of how the Vietnamese came to Germany. It then goes on to discuss the political history of two Buddhist temples in Berlin. Finally, it examines how Buddhism addresses the spiritual needs of the different kinds of Vietnamese migrants.

## Vietnamese in Germany

The two large groups of Vietnamese that have been received in Germany are the boat refugees of 1978 and the subsequent years in the German Federal Republic (hereafter GFR) and the contract laborers in the same period arriving in the

communist German Democratic Republic (hereafter GDR). On April 30, 1975, Saigon fell, and in 1976 North- and South Vietnam were officially united as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. When the Americans left South Vietnam, they evacuated some 130,000 Vietnamese to the United States (Espiritu 2014: 24). The communist regime targeted first the former South Vietnamese military and civil authorities and put them into reeducation camps that contained up to a million people. Subsequently, small businesses were disowned, and their owners put in reeducation camps in order to create a socialist plan economy. Among them were many Vietnamese people of Chinese descent. During 1978 and 1979, about 250,000 Chinese-Vietnamese in North Vietnam began to flee to China with permission (Osborne 1980), but in fact, they were pushed by the Vietnamese authorities, because the relations between China and Vietnam had deteriorated quickly after the victory of North Vietnam and especially after the invasion of Pol Pot's Cambodia by Vietnamese troops.

Soon other groups also started to flee Vietnam: students, shopkeepers, former South Vietnamese officials, and intellectuals; prominently also Catholics and Buddhists who feared the religious persecution by the communists (see Nguyen, this volume). Many of them fled by land to Cambodia and Thailand or by sea to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines; the number of asylees registered in Southeast Asian countries reached 209,000 by July 1979 (Stein 1979). In July 1979, a refugee conference was called in Geneva and decided to speed up the adoption of refugees in the so-called third countries. The number of refugees to be distributed was determined as 260,000 for 1979 and 1980. The United States, Australia, Canada, France, and, with lesser numbers, the GFR and Britain were the main recipients. The governments of Indonesia and the Philippines declared a willingness to act as regional centers for redistribution over third countries (Robinson 1998).

Immediately after the Fall of Saigon, the GFR government had declared a willingness to accept a contingent of refugees without submitting them to individual asylum procedures: first, a thousand, which later expanded to 6,000, then to 10,000, and, finally, to 38,000 (Wolf 2007: 6). The government of Lower Saxony decided on its own without consultation with the federal government to bring 1,000 refugees out of camps in Thailand and Malaysia. The Vietnamese boat refugees who were brought to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1979 did not have to apply for asylum when they were taken out of refugee camps in Southeast Asia or from boats crossing the South China Sea. For this purpose, a specific legal status was developed, that of the *Kontingentflüchtling*, which made it possible to accept refugees as a group rather than as individuals. Also, the *Kontingentflüchtling* obtained asylum without going through a regular

procedure requested by the Federal Republic. It also allowed for distribution over the regional states of the GFR. All family members of those who had been accepted as *Kontingentflüchtling* were also included in this status.

At the same time, the GDR began to recruit Vietnamese contract laborers. In the mid-1970s, the GDR had signed treaties with Vietnam, Cuban, Angola, and Mozambique to bring contract laborers to work in the industry. These contracts ranged from four to five years. The treaty with Vietnam was signed in 1980, exactly at the time that the GFR was accepting boat refugees. Since then, the largest number of contract laborers in the GDR was Vietnamese, amounting to more than 60,000 in 1989 (Weiss 2005; Hüwelmeier 2017). Besides contract labors, the GDR also received Vietnamese for educational purposes. Between 1973 and 1978, the GDR had a program for teaching children of political cadres that reached 10,000 Vietnamese children. These flows of humans and supports were part of the socialist development program that had had a modest beginning in the 1950s and was part of a Cold War mirror program of Western development aid. Contrary to a widespread understanding among Vietnamese themselves, Vietnam paid its war debts to the GDR not by the contract labor, but rather by agricultural products (Raendchen 2000).

With the fall of the Communist regime in the GDR and the East-West reunification, a new situation emerged, in which the Vietnamese *Kontingentflüchtlinge* in the GFR, who had come in the early 1980s, still applied for family reunion, albeit obviously in diminishing numbers, while new refugees had to go through the regular asylum procedures. At the same time, the consensus was that Vietnamese contract laborers should, in principle, be sent back to Vietnam after having concluded their five-year contract. In practice, the collapsing economy in the GDR at that time could not even provide jobs for the ongoing contracts. Seventy percent of Vietnamese workers were unemployed (Hillmann 2005). Contract workers were encouraged to return to their homeland with 3,000 Deutsch Mark as compensation. During the transition to a unified political system, legal status for the contract workers of the GDR was a complicated question. In the meantime, the Vietnamese government reluctantly took back its citizens who had a firsthand experience of the revolution leading to the loss of communism in Europe and who did not sign on a return application (Weiss 2005). After negotiations, the German and the Vietnamese governments came to an agreement in which the former paid development aid of 100 million Deutsche Mark in 1995 and another 100 million in 1996. In return, the Vietnamese government declared a willingness to take back 20,000 people. All of this, of course, boils down to a negotiation between the states of Vietnam and Germany in the aftermath of the Cold War,

signaling the possibility of new economic relations. The German government took it for granted that returnees, all of them contract workers, would not face persecution back home. As of December 31, 1990, about 21,000 contract workers remained in unified Germany (Weiss 2005: 80). The Vietnamese who remained in Germany found themselves living in legal limbo. Many of them applied for asylum with the hope that they would prolong their residency in the GFR (Weiss 2005). There is no information about asylum applicants and the political and religious motivations of their claim. Among those who returned to Vietnam, some were regretful about their decision (Hillmann 2005), and some found ways to go back to Germany years later (Weiss 2005).

In this chapter, we propose to see the “Vietnamese migration” as a total phenomenon in which people who suffered from the devastation of their country after several decades of war did everything they could to leave for more promising regions of the world. This “total phenomenon” approach, deriving from the notion of “total social fact” of Marcel Mauss (1990), means that, on the one hand, Vietnamese migration is seen as the single case study, and on the other hand, this single case requires an examination of the historical and social context of the interrelated world in which it is situated. The imposed difference between Vietnamese boat refugees and Vietnamese contract laborers is contested by Vietnamese migrants themselves. Who they are depends on the way their choices and actions are narrativized in conflicting versions of nationalism within the context of international relations.

The relation between the Northern Vietnamese contract workers and Southern Vietnamese boat refugees is but one of many examples that show how state policies, both German and Vietnamese, failed to capture the dynamic realities. Although being aware of each other’s existence, members of the two groups only had their first encounter after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Starting with social and commercial exchanges, the relation between many former boat refugees and contract workers soon became intimate. We don’t have the exact statistics since the ethnicity of citizens is not recorded, but we have observed that marriage between North and South Vietnamese is common in Germany. Due to the state policy that divided them into small groups and assigned them to various localities in Germany, the dominance of ethnic endogamy among the first generation, and the political difficulty of connecting with the home country, Vietnamese refugees had a serious problem in finding marriage partners from their own ethnic background in Germany. The flow of especially male Vietnamese former contract workers from East to West Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall provided a solution to this problem. In Göttingen alone, we encountered almost a dozen families

with partners from both groups. Marriage is the most intimate way to national unification among the Vietnamese population in Germany.

Religion is another area in which the two groups sought unification and reconciliation, but not always with success. Religions that Vietnamese boat refugees and contract workers claim to follow are significantly different. While the later mostly claim to be nonreligious, the former identify themselves as Catholic or Buddhist followers (Baumann 2000; Hüwelmeier 2011). Although claiming to be nonreligious, the religious practices of former Vietnamese contract workers are far more diverse. Throughout our fieldwork, we have seen people practicing folk religions (the worship of Mother Goddess, Hùng kings, or other national heroes), ancestor worship, Buddhism, Pentecostalism, and Catholicism. The popular claim of nonreligious identity among Vietnamese contract workers resonates with the statistical data taken for the population in Vietnam, which reflects the tricky division between institutionalized religions and everyday beliefs (Salemink 2007). There is a clash between followers of different religions. However, in the scope of this research, we center on the political division playing out in Buddhism.<sup>1</sup>

In the following, we discuss the history and relation between the Linh Thúu Temple in West Berlin, established by Southern Vietnamese, and the Phổ Đà Temple, established by Vietnamese traders who were former contract workers in the Đồng Xuân bazaar. Traders in Đồng Xuân came from diverse nationalities and practiced various religions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Vietnamese folk beliefs, Islam, and Sikhism (Hüwelmeier 2016). However, we want to focus on Buddhism in this chapter. The relation and competition between these two temples, as we will show, is just one of many examples about how the legacy of the Cold War and its unfolding in its most important center (Berlin City) is experienced by an ethnic community like the Vietnamese.

While the dynamic relation between former boat refugees and former contract laborers remains important, it is significant that since the 1990s other groups of Vietnamese migrants have joined the community as students, tourists, family members, or undocumented migrants. This does not change the importance of the North-South opposition, but it does affect the nature of the overall relations in subtle ways. Not everyone is burdened with the same history.

## Two Temples

In this part, we first discuss the establishment of different Buddhist temples in Berlin. This establishment resonates with the irreconcilable split between the

former Vietnamese boat refugees and contract workers. The political division playing out in the religious field in Germany is nothing but the continuation of the political and religious tension during the Vietnam War, which is subsequently reviewed.

In Berlin today, there are nearly a dozen Buddhist temples, several of which serve exclusively the religious needs of more than 20,000 Vietnamese migrants in the city. Linh Thúu Pagoda in Spandau, West Berlin, is the oldest among these ethnic-religious institutions. It has been legally recognized by the Berlin municipal government for more than two decades and has been celebrated as a space of refuge for Vietnamese in distress. In the 1980s, a group of boat refugees met in a small apartment in Spandau district to meditate and pray for the Buddha under the instruction of Venerable Phươg Trươg, a Buddhist monk based in Hannover. Sometimes when the number of attendants in these prayer sessions rose over the capacity of the apartment, the group would borrow a room at the Theravada Buddhist Temple run by Sri Lankan monks in the neighboring district, Frohnau. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was perceived as a critical historical turn to the development of this Buddhist community. After the Wall came down, there were active efforts to extend this space of refuge to the former contract workers, who had come mostly from North Vietnam to the GDR and lost their legal residence status in the newly unified Germany. Members of the community organized charity and support for North Vietnamese crossing the Wall to West Berlin. Seeing themselves as refugees who a decade ago risked their life to leave Vietnam in search of freedom, Buddhist boat refugees of Berlin saw the Vietnamese contract workers as refugees fleeing the exploitative and controlling communist East Germany. Now the boat refugees had the power to help and to shelter these people in distress: a perfect Buddhist merit-earning act. In the words of Mr. Luong, a former boat refugee from South Vietnam, under the benevolent shadow of Buddha there was no more North-South, Communist-Republican enemy, there was only the warmth of the Viet blood that they shared (see Figure 6.1).

The participation of North Vietnamese contract workers boosted the growth of this Buddhist community. Throughout the 1990s, under the leadership of Nun Diêu Phươc, the community purchased a large plot of land and built a new temple. In 2006, Linh Thúu Pagoda was completed. Architecturally, the main hall of the pagoda is a modern interpretation of the One Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi, perhaps the most famous religious architecture of North Vietnam. This reflects both the idea that the temple leadership wants to promote, namely Buddhism as the essence of Vietnamese identity, and the nostalgia of many North contract workers who had financed the construction of the temple.



**Figure 6.1** Linh Thú Pagoda on a quiet day, 2017; photo by Nga T. Mai.

These efforts to include the North Vietnamese contract workers also reflect a desire to promote Buddhism as a reconciliatory force between the past and the future, and the North and the South Vietnamese. This idea can be found in many publications by Vietnamese Buddhist authorities in Germany. It is also expressed in popular writings, one of the best examples of which is a short story that received an award in 2006 in a writing competition organized by Viên Giác Temple in Hannover (to which Linh Thú Pagoda organizationally belongs). Hien, the protagonist, was a young contract worker from North Vietnam who found himself in an impossible situation after the Berlin Wall collapsed. Jobless and without hope to return to Vietnam, Hien went into the illegal cigarette trade and lived in constant anxiety, fearing for his life from gang violence to German police raids. In one distressful encounter with German police, instead of being arrested, Hien was convinced by a young and kind police officer to give up the illegal trade. The police officer also helped Hien to set up his life as a shopkeeper, and the two became friends. The police officer was a Buddhist and brought Hien to Viên Giác Temple, where he met Van, and soon the two fell in love. Van came from a Vietnamese boat refugee family. Van's father liked Hien instantly when Hien was introduced to the family. But when Hien recognized his own

father in a photo taken with Van's father in the Mekong Delta in the late 1960s, the mood changed. It turned out, contrary to what Hien initially assumed, that his father was not a friend of Van's father. Instead, to Van's father, Hien's father was a terrible communist cadre, who would not hesitate to shoot at people who refused to fight for the communist side. Van's father was one of these people, in a battle that they could not win. His best friend was killed by Hien's father. This discovery of Hien's family history put a halt to the plan for the future of Van and Hien. However, thanks to the advice of Venerable Thích Như Điển, Van's father eventually agreed not to punish Hien for his father's bad deeds and let bygones be bygones. Moreover, Hien's father had already paid for his crime with being disenchanted with communism and going mad at his late age. Hien and Van's marriage received the blessing of Van's father as well as that of the Venerable Thích Như Điển. After marriage, thanks to Van's excellent command of German language and knowledge about German bureaucracy as well as Hien's large networks of friends of former contract workers, the couple could set up a trade center for the Vietnamese community in Leipzig. Eventually, the couple's ambition was to set up a Buddhist temple in Leipzig for their own community.

This short story is a narrative told about Buddhism's power to heal wounds and soothe the pain for Vietnamese refugees (Van's parents and their refugee community). Buddhism is idealized as a reconciliatory force to bring two former enemies together so that they can embrace each other again in ethnic sanguinity and love. Such ideal, however, is far from being realized in various Vietnamese communities in Germany, especially among the North and South Vietnamese Buddhists in Berlin. The effort to include North Vietnamese former contract workers into the Linh Thửu Buddhist family soon ran against a number of obstacles. On a daily basis, the cultural differences, sometimes very subtle, led to disagreement and resentment between the two groups (Su 2017). In the words of Mrs. My, a boat refugee and one of the core members of the Linh Thửu Buddhist family, "North Vietnamese got it all wrong when it comes to worship the Buddha. They come here [Linh Thửu Pagoda] still out of *tham, sân, si* (delusion, greed, and aversion). They don't care about being enlightened by the Buddha." The fact that Mrs. My assembled her wealth by trading with North Vietnamese entrepreneurs and organizing several rotating credit associations (*tổ hội*) in which she charged a hefty fee for safeguarding and circulating the cash earned from backbreaking informal labor by former contract workers did not prevent her from criticizing North Vietnamese. She listed a number of improprieties of Vietnamese Buddhists from the North, such as dressing inappropriately when coming to the temples, addressing monks and nuns inappropriately, speaking

harshly and loudly, and bringing inappropriate offerings (such as meat and cigarettes) to the temple, etc. In her view, these shortcomings resulted from the decades of indoctrination by the atheist communist government. It was her job and that of others in the Buddhist family to carry out the Buddha teaching to be benevolent and forgiving and to patiently guide the northern brothers to find the true path to the enlightenment.

It is commonly agreed among Vietnamese, north or south alike, that the Southern Vietnamese accent was better than the Northern one in prayers. Ms. Thuong, a widow of a North Vietnamese former contract worker, told us that when she heard a Buddhist chanting by South Vietnamese voice, it touched her heart. It was as if the soft and gentle sound of the accent always brought her right away into the calm, the serene, and the benevolent realm of the Buddha. On the other hand, she would need a few more minutes to reach such meditative stage should the sutra be chanted by a North Vietnamese accent, which in her word always sounded so *trần tục và giả tạo* (vulgar and fake). The distinction in the perception of North or South Vietnamese voice and sound in Buddhist prayers is directly connected to the recent history of North-South Vietnamese separation. For three decades, North Vietnamese under the warring socialist regime were forbidden to explore certain areas of their “sensory regime” (Meyer and Moors 2016). Revolutionary songs, militant slogans, or somber preach of ideology were allowed, whereas sentimental songs, poetic speeches, and romantic music were banned. The South, on the contrary, witnessed a boom of sentimental bolero music in addition to an exuberant musical and theater scene that featured classic and modern sagas celebrating loves and personal feelings. For a short while following the unification of the country, Northern authorities condemned it as “yellow” music—the music was seen as *sến, ủy mị* (sad, emotional). Soon, however, the wave of sentimental sound swept over the whole North to the extent that it is observed that the North may win the war, but it is the South that wins the heart of all Vietnamese people.<sup>2</sup> For North Vietnamese now, the accent of the South helps them to overcome the cold distances between communities, between individuals, and even between their inner and outer selves.

In the spiritual realm, a parallel process took place. Before 1975, while Buddhism was entirely under state control in the North and was made into a political tool for mass mobilization, Southern Buddhists enjoyed greater autonomy. The conflict between Buddhists and the Catholic regime of Ngô Đình Diệm<sup>3</sup> not only clearly demonstrated the wider social and political influence of Buddhism (in comparison with Catholicism) but also lent South Vietnamese Buddhism a greater air of independence and purity from the influence of

political ideologies and state control. With the revival of Buddhism in the North since the 1990s, South Buddhist practices, meditation, and teachings have been seen as the most authentic and pure form of Vietnamese Buddhism. The chant of a monk from South Vietnam makes a sutra more intimate and powerful. Many Vietnamese Buddhists in Berlin concurred to the fact that they liked to attend prayer and meditation led by South Vietnamese monks.

However, the sound alone would not convince North Vietnamese Buddhists to be fully a part of the Linh Thứu Buddhist family. Toward the end of the 2000s, many traders in Lichtenberg district in East Berlin met to form their own. In 2007, with the active leadership and sponsorship of Ms. Trịnh Thị Mùi, the owner of the Asia Pacific Center, one of the two largest Vietnamese trading bazaars in Berlin, a temple called Phổ Đà was inaugurated within the grounds of the Bazaar. Buddhist and Guanyin statues were selected and sent from Vietnam to Berlin by supportive members of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the official Buddhist organization in Vietnam. Sixty sets of lay Buddhist robes were brought over from Vietnam so that the temple's members could dress more uniformly and solemnly. In the following years, two monks, one from Vietnam and one from Paris, were invited to take residence in the temple to lead this growing Buddhist community (see Figure 6.2).

Since 2011, a group of Buddhists traders in Đồng Xuân Center, another giant Vietnamese Bazaar, bigger and faster-growing than the Asia Pacific Center, announced the establishment of yet another separate Buddhist Association,



**Figure 6.2** The gate to Phổ Đà Temple next to the entrance of the Asia Pacific Center (a bazaar owned by a Vietnamese former contract worker), 2018; photo by Nga T. Mai.

with their own temple, also (confusingly) called Phổ Đà. This Phổ Đà Temple, however, existed only virtually between 2011 and 2013. A Vietnamese New Year celebration that took place in the office building of the Đồng Xuân Center in January 2012 also included an elaborated requiem (a Buddhist ritual to appease the souls of the dead and to pray for peace) and a “bathing the Buddha ritual” conducted by two monks who came from Vietnam. Mr. Nguyễn Văn Hiến, the owner of Đồng Xuân Center, and his family were given the honor to pour the first scoop of water over the baby Buddha with his finger pointing upward. This Buddha had been bestowed upon the community by a delegation of monks from the headquarter of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha on an official visit in the year before. However, since the group did not have a physical temple structure, the Buddha was stored in a closet inside the administrative office of the market on the first floor of the outer building. In the afternoon before the requiem took place, one of us (Tam Ngo) was talking to the monks in this office. At the moment before the Buddha should be taken out, dusted off, and brought to the altar set up downstairs in the meeting hall, Tam was asked by Ms. Van, the head of the association, to wait outside. Later, she was told by Ms. Van that the monks had instructed her to do so because a “researcher from a German religious institute” should not see a “not-so-sacred moment,” namely a dusting of the Buddha. Tam told Ms. Van that on the contrary she found that that was a very sacred moment, as it shows a magical transformation of an object (a statue being stored and covered in dust) to a powerful religious symbol, an embodiment of the Buddha no less, by a simple act of cleaning off some dust on him. And for Tam, as a researcher, it was fascinating and important to gain insights into this moment by witnessing it. Ms. Van looked rather puzzled at Tam’s explanation and shied away from any further discussion on the matter. Later, Tam learned from other members of the Phổ Đà Temple that, like Ms. Van, they found having to store the Buddha statue inside a closet was an act of “extreme reluctance” (*bản cùng bất đắc dĩ*) and showed the poor material condition of their earnest attempt to honor the Buddha, something they preferred not to be confronted with, even by themselves. This Đồng Xuân’s Phổ Đà Temple existed as an underground as it has neither legal status (as being registered as a religious institution or association) nor a physical space (such as a temple building), as the Buddha had to live a mobile life in various locations inside the huge Đồng Xuân market. In 2013, the group purchased a large piece of land (3,000 square meters, on Dorfstraße 28, Berlin) and renovated an old building existing on the land into a temple. Since then, there have been two Vietnamese temples, which were just a few kilometers from each other, and both were called Phổ Đà. During the establishment of

the second Phổ Đà Temple, internal conflict ripped the Đồng Xuân Buddhist community apart, with one fraction wanting to remain operating inside the bazaar and the other fraction wanting to invest in the expansion of infrastructure outside the bazaar. To avoid confusion, in October 2013, the monk in charge of the Dorfstraße Phổ Đà Temple changed its name to Từ Ân Temple.

In spring 2016, we visited the Venerable Thích Đức Thiện, the head of the international relations department of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, in Hanoi. The monk spoke enthusiastically about the wealth and the importance of the Vietnamese community in Germany which hosted him on several visits in the previous years. He was not so forthcoming, however, when asked about any plan for the Vietnamese community in Berlin specifically. Two months later, the *nguoiviet.de*, the community online newspaper, published several articles announcing the official visit of Thích Đức Thiện and members of the Vietnamese embassy in Đồng Xuân Center, prior to the Vesak Day to break the ground for the construction of a new Buddhist temple, on a plot of land even bigger than that of Từ Ân Temple. This temple was envisioned to be the headquarter of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in Germany.<sup>4</sup> But until it is built, the Vietnamese embassy actively utilizes both Từ Ân and Phổ Đà as venues for political and cultural events directly connected to the agenda of the Vietnamese government in gaining access and control of Vietnamese immigrants (mostly former contract workers).

The decision by North Vietnamese Buddhists to set up their own temples separate from the Linh Thú Pagoda has many explanations. While some informants mentioned the 30 kilometer distance from Lichtenberg district, where most North Vietnamese Buddhist lived and worked, to Linh Thú, others reasoned the irreconcilable cultural difference between the two groups. Some North Vietnamese informants straightforwardly condemned South Vietnamese refugees they encountered at the Linh Thú Pagoda as arrogant and hostile, calling the contract workers behind their back as *phi nhân*, a term that was coined by South Vietnamese refugees to call contract workers who were brought to the GDR mostly by airplane (*phi cơ*) as opposing to themselves *thuyền nhân* (boat refugees). However, the term *phi nhân* is mainly for its pejoratively meaning referring “a person without any humanity” as some South Vietnamese anti-communist activists saw all North Vietnamese contract workers as inhuman agents of an inhuman regime. We argue that the most important reason why many North Vietnamese refrained from participating in Linh Thú Pagoda was political. After some years of disorientation, many North Vietnamese former contract workers became successful entrepreneurs in Berlin. Having a good

political connection with the communist government of Vietnam became desirable. Linh Thú Pagoda was founded by the refugees and organizationally belonged to the Unified Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, which is not recognized by the Vietnamese government (and treated as an underground sect in Vietnam). To a lesser extent, as the concentration of North Vietnamese in East Berlin grew, a desire developed to have their own Buddhist temple, which could be used as a venue for the community's cultural activities. To a greater extent, the support of the Vietnamese government, from indirect to direct by sending various members of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the official Buddhist organization in Vietnam, to come to conduct Buddhist service and take control of these temples escalated the political rift and conflict between the East Berlin-North Vietnamese and West Berlin-South Vietnamese Buddhist communities.

The relations, conflicts, and schism in the Vietnamese Buddhist communities in Berlin reflect the ongoing legacy of the Cold War and its unfolding in the city of Berlin. During the Vietnam War (between 1955 and 1975), South Vietnamese Buddhist authorities were predominantly members of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), established in 1964, partly to take a position against the suppression of Buddhism of the Catholic Ngô Đình Diệm regime. In 1975, after the takeover of the South, the North Vietnamese government targeted the UBCV, in the general plan to dissolve all religious and secular associations of the South, forcing an absolute unification with the North. Thích Huyền Quang, the patriarch of UBCV, and Venerable Thích Quảng Độ, the head of UBCV's Viện Hóa Đạo (Institute for the Dissemination of the Dharma), had from the beginning already refused to collaborate with the communist government. Instead, in 1977, the Patriarch Thích Huyền Quang sent a letter to then premier Phạm Văn Đồng detailing all the crimes and corruption of communist leaders in various locations in the South. This led to Thích Huyền Quang's arrest and subsequent years of detention and then house arrest. In 1981, the Vietnamese government established the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), an organization allegedly representing all branches, temples, and Buddhist schools in the country, directly under the control of the Fatherland Front. The leadership of UBCV refused to become part of the VBS, and ever since it was deemed not only illegal (unrecognized) but also an anti-communist and anti-state religious association. Before he passed away in 2008, Most Venerable Patriarch Thích Huyền Quang named Venerable Thích Quảng Độ his successor, the Most Venerable Patriarch of UBCV. Like his predecessor, Thích Quảng Độ remains a fervent opponent of communist rule. He became known worldwide as an advocate of human rights and democracy.

Most Buddhist temples in the West see themselves as members of the UBCV, and many take the same political position as that of Thích Quảng Độ. However, toward the end of the 2000s, a desire to return and reconnect with Vietnam grew among both leaders and followers of many oversea UBCV temples. A number of Buddhist authorities in Overseas UBCV actively organized a round trip to Vietnam with charity activities and visits to original temples (*tổ đình*), and started dialogues with the Vietnamese government. This willingness for dialogue was perceived by Thích Quảng Độ and his disciples as an act of betrayal. This led to a separation in the UBCV. In a press release on August 24, 2008, the Paris-based spokesperson of UBCV, Võ Văn Ái, announced Thích Quảng Độ's decision to renounce UBCV with three of its branches in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. Buddhist members of the South Vietnamese refugee community in Germany are embedded, organizationally and theologically, in the larger network of European UBCV. After the decision of Venerable Thích Quảng Độ, most of the temples attended by South Vietnamese refugees in Germany were excommunicated from the Vietnam-based UBCV.

The Linh Thú Pagoda in Berlin, led by Nun Diệu Phước, who is a member of the European UBCV, was accordingly disowned by Thích Quảng Độ. In 2010, the leadership of Linh Thú was accused of abusing the name UBCV to call for donations. This accusation was made by members of a fervent anti-communist group in Berlin, who run the online forum *Thongtinberlin.de*. To answer their accusation, the Parisian-based spokesperson of UBCV stated that while the UBCV has excommunicated the European branch, Linh Thú Pagoda had never been officially registered as a member of the UBCV, thus, indeed, using of the title UBCV for their charity activities or to propagating the Dharma was a violation of the law.

## An Alternative Buddhist Space in the Heart

To avoid being caught in this rivalry, a growing number of Vietnamese Buddhists, mostly consisting of former female contract workers and semi-documented female migrants, have been in search again for a new Buddhist space in which they do not have to confront the question of political ideologies nor social belongings. Recently, many of these women found their answer in the online Light and Sound Meditation movement, led by the obscure Master Ruma, or Venerable Trần Tâm, a Vietnamese refugee who converted to Tantric Buddhism a decade ago and is now leading a global follower and owning a chain of vegan

restaurants in Thailand and Cambodia. We will illustrate this by highlighting just one extended case from the category of recent migrants to Germany.

Mai came from an ordinary peasant family in central Vietnam. She was married at the age of nineteen and moved in with her husband. The marriage was followed by the birth of their two children. In 1987, when she was pregnant with her second child, her husband died from a disease. Being left on her own, she took her two children with her to the neighboring province southward in search for economic opportunities. She opened a street-side shop selling tea, beverages, and groceries to earn a living. There, she found it very difficult to live as a single woman and a single mother in a society where women were seen as men's property. She recalled one of many similar accidents which led to the event of the third pregnancy:

I was teased and harassed in those days because the men knew I was a widow. Some even lurked around my house and whistled. By that time, Xiu's father [Xiu is Mai's youngest daughter] worked on his construction project in Quảng Bình and lived near my place. He liked me, although he was married. He was good to me. One day, a man sneaked into my house. He [Xiu's father] was there outside and saw what happened; he came back and chased the man away. I thought he was a nice person. When I got pregnant with Xiu, he promised to get divorced. I did not want that to happen; then, I left him.

In 2004, Mai deserted the place where she had lived since her husband's death, brought her three children to Hanoi, rented them a house in a suburb of the city, and left them by themselves in the city with some money. She got on a flight heading to the Czech Republic, from where she traveled to Germany—her desired destination. When she left, her oldest son was about twenty years old, and the youngest daughter was just ten. She spent 500 million Vietnamese Dong (about €20,000) by mortgaging her parents' piece of land on the smugglers. For many years until now, Mai could not resolve her resentment and feeling of hurt toward her relatives for leaving her and her children unsupportive and forsaken.

Since arriving in Germany, Mai has untiringly worked any job that has been given. She always shared her living space with other Vietnamese fellows. She worked as a domestic helper in Vietnamese families, caring for children and household chores. There was a very limited choice if one clandestine migrant, like her, wanted to make money. This babysitting job was always in high demand since hiring a countrywoman without legal status was the cheapest option at hand. In the meantime, migrants easily accepted the live-in requirement and twenty-four-hour standby service. For taking the job offer, Mai would earn her

children decent lives and a shelter to sleep. Without contract and subtle job agreements, she constantly moved from one family to another.

On some occasions, Mai found refuge in a small pagoda in Brandenburg, a neighboring state of Berlin, where she supported the staff voluntarily in their daily works. The refuge in the Buddha's welcoming arms was significant for her and many other Vietnamese who could not avail themselves to the German state's support. Historically, Linh Thử Pagoda had achieved its reputation in putting the war aside and giving a helping hand to the disoriented Vietnamese after the collapse of the Communist Block. Now, to the undocumented migrants, Buddhist space has gained its name as a place of refuge. This role, though, is not an established one compared to the "sanctuary communities" (Marfleet 2011) from the Christian tradition. For undocumented Vietnamese migrants like Mai, a religious place provides them a place to stay, daily meals, and a closer social and language environment to their origin. More importantly, this refuge does not require from them proof of persecution and the horrendously bureaucratic application.

Throughout the years, Buddhism has played an increasingly significant role in consoling Mai's life and influencing her worldview. Her perspective toward her joys and suffering was embedded in her religious beliefs. Mai explained to us as to why many times she could not find anything better than a babysitting job. This no-other-choice situation was her karmic debt that she paid for her parents, who lost their baby before Mai was born. Often citing the law of cause and effect, she always found the answer to the important question "why" as in "why did it happen to me?" In this way, Buddhism provides her an explanation for the existence of inequality.

For the last three years, Mai became an ardent disciple of Master Ruma. For her, this conversion does not strongly contradict her previous religious belief. Indeed, this conversion was like a breath of fresh air brought in together with her new social status and a new feeling of belonging. Master Ruma, or Venerable Trần Tâm, was born in 1972 in Vietnam to a Buddhist family. At the age of twelve, he flew to the United States. There he was adopted into a Catholic family. This family background had an impact on his religious practices later. He established a Buddhist sect, called Pháp môn Diệu Âm (Light and Sound Meditation), followed by mostly Vietnamese migrants in the States, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Pháp môn Diệu Âm promotes meditation and vegetarianism as the way to enlightenment and the Knowledge of Truth. Master Ruma claims himself to be a living Buddha with the divine power to guide and lead people to the self-liberation and the internal existence. In his autobiography, he emphasizes his

own move from a happy family man and his marriage in California to establish a huge Buddhist faction in Thailand, Lao, and Cambodia and to expand his outreach to Europe. Through feeling light and sound during meditation, with the help of Master Ruma, practitioners can experience the grace of *Thượng Đế* (Heavenly Ruler or the Highest Deity, or God) and Buddha.<sup>5</sup> Over the years, the Buddhist sect of Master Ruma has been growing in numbers. The establishment of the Meditation Center in Cambodia is evidence of this growing. To facilitate his disciples' meditation, Master Ruma recorded his voice in CDs distributed to people at a voluntary cost. To Vietnamese authorities, Master Ruma and his sect is seen as heresy and following his practices means disturbing the social and public order.<sup>6</sup> Official Buddhists in Vietnam consider him a fraud and his religious doctrine harmful to Buddhism. Mai, among the increased number of followers in Berlin, became the core members of Master Ruma's group. Being aware of the controversial position of Master Ruma and his belief, she defended her conversion and said, "all streams flow to the sea. All religions aim at one goal. What is important is how you transform yourself, rather than which religion you choose. As soon as you follow the Master [Master Ruma], you don't worship, venerate [as in ancestor worship], and consecrate any more."

What can we learn from the conversion from conventional Buddhism to Master Ruma's Light and Sound Meditation in the case of Mai? First, Vietnamese Buddhism lacked the systematized consistency in its religious practices (Soucy 2012). Thus, in Vietnam, Buddhism shared many features of folk beliefs or spirituals. Although Master Ruma and his faction adopted different practices and religious ideologies from various Buddhist factions and Catholicism, his core languages and beliefs still borrowed mostly from Buddhism. Mai's conversion can be understood in this context. Changing to Light and Sound Meditation is choosing a different Buddhist leader and seeking a different way to happiness and protection. Second, and more importantly, her alienation from conventional Buddhism of the Vietnamese diaspora in Germany reveals the political tension manifested in religious life between boat refugees and contract workers and the emerging need of new Vietnamese migrants in their search of a religious space. Mai, with her new legal and social status, actively engaged in the new religious movement of the Light and Sound Meditation, felt estranged from the established Buddhist communities of West and East Berlin. Her migration history, her political stance, and her economic background do not fit into both. This discrepancy led Mai to find herself in the alignment with Master Ruma's personal history and teaching. Master Ruma was himself a migrant who often raised questions about the self and proclaimed to find Dhamar through

meditation and vegetarianism. His teaching places great emphasis on the struggles of migrants, love for Vietnam, health, and emotional self. Confronting and belonging to a political ideology is not part of the path to find a self and the Enlightenment. His beliefs and practices face obstacles for recognition, similar to the obstacles that new migrants faced in their search for a social place.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the country left by various types of Vietnamese still looms large in their minds and daily concerns. The legacy of the American war and later the Chinese war is still the most important element in relations among the Vietnamese in Germany. Vietnamese former refugees are often much better off than North Vietnamese former contract laborers, but slowly this is changing with the expanding opportunities for trading with Vietnam. The ones who are truly disadvantaged are the illegal migrants who have come to Germany as a fabled land of opportunity long after the reunification of Vietnam. All these divisions and tensions are reflected in Vietnamese Buddhism in Germany. Buddhism is not a neutral, transcendent belief system, but historically a major player in Vietnamese politics. It is inevitable that the Vietnamese government tries to use Buddhism to control the diaspora. It is just as inevitable that South Vietnamese boat refugees resent this. At the same time, some Vietnamese attempt to escape this political game. For the search of a Buddhist space of each Vietnamese group, Buddhism evidences its dynamics and adaptability to accommodate diverse needs across space and time. To show this, we have ended with giving a case study of an individual for whom Buddhism offers a way to cope with an incredibly fraught and difficult migrant situation.