

# Homeland Politics and Vietnamese in the U.S.: Remittances, Homeland Travel, and Anti-Communist Activities

Hiroko Furuya

## Introduction

Since their arrival following the victory of Communist forces in Saigon in 1975, Vietnamese in the U.S.<sup>1)</sup> have had a confrontational, often contradictory, relationship with the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (SRVN). The government of the SRVN initially looked upon the refugees as “traitors” and “enemies” who fled the homeland; Vietnamese in the U.S., in turn, took an aggressive stance, forming organizations with the explicit intent to “overthrow the communist government, liberate the homeland”<sup>2)</sup> and developing a strongly anti-communist political attitude. Yet as their political action in America focused on subverting and pressuring the regime abroad, the economic and social actions of Vietnamese in the U.S. took a different route. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, when contact and exchange between Vietnam and the US was difficult, they maintained informal social and economic ties with Vietnam and developed increasingly strong transnational networks.

The dichotomy between the social/economic and political attitudes of Vietnamese in the U.S. has become more pronounced as the SRVN, like other communist states, has reconsidered its state-centered approach in recent years and embraced limited aspects of free-market economics. The adoption of *Đổi Mới*, or “renovation”, at the Sixth Party of Congress in 1986 opened a new era for Vietnam, paving the way for the restoration of diplomatic relations with the United States and a new approach toward its overseas population. Once thought of as conspirators in the American “puppet regime” in Saigon, the SRVN now openly courts Vietnamese in the U.S., welcoming them as an “integral part of the nation.”

What has been the response of Vietnamese in the U.S. to the overtures? Have the policies of *Đổi Mới* affected Vietnamese in the U.S. — and improved their attitudes toward engaging with their homeland and the SRVN government?

My purpose below is to address these questions. Specifically, I analyze the attitudes of Vietnamese toward Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN) and their transnational activities by using data collected in Vietnam and the results of a telephone poll conducted in 2003 of 500

---

<sup>1)</sup> In this paper, I use the terms “Vietnamese American” to specify Vietnamese who naturalized to the U.S. citizen. The terms “Vietnamese in America” and “Vietnamese in the U.S.”, etc., cover U.S. citizens and permanent residents. There are few Vietnamese who stay in the U.S. temporarily as students or workers.

<sup>2)</sup> Mặt trận quốc gia thống nhất giải phóng Việt Nam.

residents of Vietnamese ethnicity in Orange County, California — the largest Vietnamese community in the United States. In the survey, I repeat some questions from polls by the Immigrant and Refugee Planning Center in 1981, the *Los Angeles Times* in 1994 and the *Orange County Register* in 2000 — which allows for the measurement of changes over time and the possible longitudinal effects of *Đổi Mới* policy and improved relations between the American and Vietnamese governments.

I shall begin by discussing the basic characteristics of the Vietnamese in the U.S. population, including the phases of migration to the States and the formation of the “Little Saigon” community in Orange County. I will then discuss the some of its early economic and political activities. This will be followed by a description of the *Đổi Mới* era in Vietnam that began in 1986. I then move to an analysis of *Đổi Mới*'s impact on the economic and political behavior of Vietnamese living in the United States, using the results of my survey. I conclude with a summary of the findings and a consideration of their significance in the context of Asian Americans and transnationalism more generally.

## **1. Vietnamese in the United States and their Transnational Networks**

### **(1) Migration Patterns**

There is little information about the number of Vietnamese who resided in America prior, since no “Vietnamese” category existed on the 1970 U.S. Census. Since 1975, however, Vietnamese migration can be categorized into four major waves:

- a) refugees who fled immediately at the end of the war in 1975 (first wave);
- b) ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese who fled following the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the late 1970s as boat people or land people (second wave);
- c) legal refugees who were admitted under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), which was signed by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Vietnam, from 1980 (however accelerated in 1990s) (third wave);  
(Worth noting is that the ODP has three categories: 1) Regular program; 2) Amerasian program; 3) Humanitarian Operations (HO) program)
- d) legal immigrants admitted via American immigration policies, such as immigration thorough family member (fourth wave).

Today only type d) immigration is possible.

### **(2) Population and Community**

Taken together, 1,122,528 Vietnamese were counted by the 2000 Census.<sup>3)</sup> This is about 0.4% of entire US population and 1.4% of all Vietnamese worldwide. But it is estimated that half of all overseas Vietnamese reside in the United States.

The Census estimates that 58.7% of Vietnamese in the U.S. were born in Vietnam and that 89.9% speak Vietnamese at home. More than two-thirds (69%) are naturalized — making

---

<sup>3)</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Census 2000.

it one of the most active citizenship-attaining immigrant populations in America.<sup>4)</sup>

Forty percent of Vietnamese are concentrated in California. Within California, 59.9% live in Southern California. There are 135,548 Vietnamese living in Orange County, which is 12.6% of total population of Vietnamese in the United States, 31.5% of those living in California, 50.3% of those living in Southern California.

### **(3) Community Formation**

When the U.S. Government evacuated and accepted Vietnamese refugees in 1975, their intent was to disperse the population, allegedly to facilitate integration into American life and to minimize the economic impact on any given community. One-third of the refugees were to settle in West, with 40% in the South, 7% in the Southwest, 20 % in the Northeast. As Camp Pendleton in nearby San Diego County served as a primary receiving and processing station for the post-war arrivals, area Catholic charities volunteered their services and offered to serve as sponsor families.<sup>5)</sup> It was from this that 12,000 Vietnamese eventually resettled just north in Orange County — providing the basis for the very type of enclave that U.S. government tried to prevent.

Literally speaking, Little Saigon started to form as the second wave of refugees arrived in the 1980s. It quickly became an economic and residential enclave - and today serves as the cultural and political epicenter for the overseas population. The economic core is a two-mile stretch of Vietnamese shops along Bolsa Avenue, which extends to Westminster and McFadden Avenues to the south and north and to Beach Boulevard and Euclid Street to the east and west, covering portions of four cities: Westminster, Garden Grove, Santa Ana and Fountain Valley.

At the end of 1975, the only Vietnamese businesses in the area were a grocery store (“Saigon Market”), which was opened by a refugee in Santa Ana. The number grew as the second wave of refugees, including ethnic Chinese arrived. As of 2003, there were 2,069 Vietnamese-owned businesses in the city of Westminster alone, which lies at the heart of the four-city area comprised by Little Saigon.<sup>6)</sup>

### **(4) Anti-Communist Political Activities in 1980s**

As the community formed, so did several anti-communist organizations.<sup>7)</sup> Groups like the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (Mặt trận quốc gia thống nhất giải phóng

---

<sup>4)</sup> Pei-te Lien, *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

<sup>5)</sup> The refugee camp in Camp Pendleton opened in 29th April 1975. Until they closed six months later, a total of 50,424 refugees stayed in this camp (Official Information for PR for the 1995 20 year reunion at Camp Pendleton, the History & Museum section of the Joint Public Affairs Office).

<sup>6)</sup> This estimate was derived from an analysis of publicly-available business license records kept by the City of Westminster. The records were matched with a Vietnamese surname list to determine the ethnicity of the business owner.

Việt Nam) and the Coalition of Vietnamese National Parties (Liên Minh Cách Mạng Việt Nam)<sup>8)</sup> were established in 1982 and 1984, respectively, and insisted on the liberation of the homeland, sometimes by force. The political platform of the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam explicitly stated as their main objectives: (a) the rescue of the homeland through united actions in promoting military struggle for Vietnam's liberation, and; (b) the reconstruction of Vietnam by the dissolution of the Communist Party and related organizations, and the termination of the existing government functions such as the Ministerial Council.<sup>9)</sup> It proposes to overthrow the existing Vietnamese government and establish a new, democratic and independent polity which guarantees freedom, human rights and affluence.

Many Vietnamese publications were launched and most tended to adhere to an anti-communist political line.

The national flag of the former South Vietnam began to be displayed at public events, and memories of the past were frequently invoked to stir emotions and instill a sense of commitment to fighting those who had been responsible for the collapse of South Vietnam.

##### (5) The Development of Transnational Networks

We are struck by the fact that, in the 1980s, the atmosphere in Little Saigon was decidedly anti-communist. Yet, at the same time, economic assistance to the families and relatives left behind in Vietnam was bustling underground. This assistance unintentionally caused the Vietnamese living in the U.S. to attract the attention of the SRV.

Because of a lack of normalized diplomatic relations and economic sanctions following the end of the war in 1975, as well as the circumstances under which refugees left Vietnam and their socioeconomic situation, it was virtually impossible for Vietnamese in the States to visit Vietnam. Moreover, there were no direct telephone connections to Vietnam and little means for physical contact.

In spite of this, they found various ways to maintain their relationships. Gift parcels are an example. These expanded as the Vietnamese community itself expanded, and it has been claimed in journalistic reports that roughly half the businesses in the community made use of some kind of ties with their homeland in 1988.<sup>10)</sup> How, then, did they succeed in sending gift parcels and remittances to Vietnam under the stringent conditions that were present?

First, there was the postal service. Based on humanitarian considerations, the U.S.

---

<sup>7)</sup> The reason why many anti-communist groups were founded after the second wave was not only due to Vietnamese population but to the war between Vietnam and China. These two countries were a "brothers" country during the Vietnam War. Many thought it was that chance to overthrow communist regime because Socialism and Communism were seeing collapse in other regions of Asia.

<sup>8)</sup> The Coalition of Vietnamese National Parties was founded in 1984. It is a coalition of some anti-communist groups. Their activity relies heavily on the use of force.

<sup>9)</sup> Mặt trận quốc gia thống nhất giải phóng Việt Nam. "Cương Lĩnh Chính Trị," Mar. 8, 1982.

<sup>10)</sup> Jeffrey Brody, "Pipeline to Vietnam; Refugees in OC Often Violate US Trade Embargo by Shipping Parcels to Relatives Overseas Millions in Goods, Cash Flow Abroad," *Orange County Register*, August 21, 1988.

government in 1978 permitted the sending of daily necessities to Vietnam by post, provided that they were strictly for personal use and that each weighed 2 pounds or less. Goods such as expensive medical drugs, clothes, electric plugs and ball-point pens, which were relatively easily convertible to money but lacking in Vietnam, were common contents.

Second, private parcel transport services approved by the U.S. Commerce Department began to emerge around 1979. The value of each parcel was restricted to not more than \$200 each (\$400 each since 1987), and no one was allowed to send more than one parcel a month to the same person. The contents were restricted to such items as food, clothes, cosmetics and medical drugs. Shipping companies, supermarkets, pharmacies and apparel stores provided the services and transported bicycles and televisions.

According to data by the Annual Report of the Export Administration of the U.S. Commerce Department, the total value of items sent to Vietnam for humanitarian purposes amounted to \$0.5 million in 1979, \$8.3 million in 1980, \$28 million in 1981 and \$48 million in 1982, reaching a peak in 1983 at \$97 million. Thereafter, \$48.3 million was sent in 1984, \$39 million in 1985, \$55 million in 1986, \$83 million in 1987, \$71 million in 1988 and \$10 million in 1989.<sup>11)</sup> Thus, parcels worth roughly \$500 million were sent to Vietnam over this 10-year period.

The sheer volume and value of parcels from the United States, \$97 million a year at maximum and \$500 million over the ten-year period, reinforced awareness by the SRV government of the importance of the Vietnamese population in the United States.<sup>12)</sup>

During this period, there were two ways of remitting, both outside the law. Under the first, money was first transferred from U.S. bank accounts to third country accounts and then to accounts in Viet Nam. The second method, which is still commonly used, does not involve actual movement of currencies. For example, when remittance agency A in Orange County receives an order from a person B, he informs his counterpart A' in Saigon, who, in turn, gives the required amount to B's relative B'. This was widely used by ethnic Chinese who kept reserves in Viet Nam and had connections in third countries like Hong Kong.

Through this method, they were able to liquidate assets left behind in Viet Nam without letting the government confiscate them, and make savings in the US instead of sending their earnings to their relatives in Viet Nam. The fact that these transactions were illegal meant obviously that they avoided paying taxes to US or Vietnamese authorities.<sup>13)</sup> Moreover, this method had advantages over the first in that remitters did not have to undergo complex procedures in English and were able to transfer gold as well as money.

---

<sup>11)</sup> Export Administration Annual Report to U.S. Commerce Department cf. Tram (1996).

<sup>12)</sup> On the Vietnamese government's policies of receiving parcels during this era please see, Hiroko Furuya "The Homeland Ties of Vietnamese in America and their Influence on Vietnam," APRU Conference Paper, 2003.

<sup>13)</sup> It also means that there are no statistics on the amount of remittances during this period.

## 2. *Đổi Mới* and the Restoration of Ties with the United States

The combination of war exhaustion, the failure of socialist economic policies, natural calamities, Western economic sanctions, and preparations for the fight against China contributed to an extreme lack of food and consumption goods in Vietnam in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The desperate situation is illustrated by the rapid depletion of the country's foreign reserve: it was already small at \$195 million in 1978, but shrank to just \$16 million in 1982 and 1983.<sup>14)</sup> At the same time, Vietnam's external debt increased from \$4.6 billion to \$5.3 billion in 1982, \$6.0 billion in 1983 and \$6.7 billion in 1985.<sup>15)</sup>

In the mid 1980s, a rethinking of socialist policies occurred. Attitudes of the SRVN toward Vietnamese in America started to change. The term "compatriots who contribute to the country," once used by the Vietnamese government only to describe those loyal to the communist cause, was now being applied to Vietnamese in the US. As their foreign debt increased and economic situation grew grim, the SRVN turned increasingly to its overseas population - particularly those remitting and sending parcels from America — for answers.

In 1984, Trường-Chinh, then the second highest-ranking Politburo member of the Communist Party, gathered reform-minded intellectuals and formed an advisory group that eventually played a large part in the landmark proposal of *Đổi Mới* at the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party.<sup>16)</sup> At the group's meeting on November 25, 1985, Vũ Quốc Tuấn, a high-ranking official of the State Planning Commission made the following statement:

We need 500 million US dollars' worth of foreign capital, but have been able to gather just 200 or 300 million dollars. We therefore need a pro-active dollar-attracting policy. There are currently 300 thousand overseas Vietnamese living in France and 200 thousand (sic) in the United States. In some years, we attracted 30 million dollars, but we have a potential for attracting an annual inflow of 80 million dollars. We should not place a restriction on the number or value of remittances from the overseas Vietnamese.<sup>17)</sup>

On December 24th, about a week after the Sixth National Congress adopted *Đổi Mới*, a report by the Vietnam News Agency quoted Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hoàng Bích Sơn:

There are over a million Vietnamese people living in over 40 countries today. The

<sup>14)</sup> Institute of Southeast Asia Studies. *Southeast Asia Directory*, Japan, 1980, 1–19, 1984, 1–21.

<sup>15)</sup> Institute of Southeast Asia Studies. *Southeast Asia Directory*, Japan, 1984, 1–33.

<sup>16)</sup> Motoo Furuta, "How was the *Doi Moi* Line Created? Inner-Party Disputes before the VIth Congress," in *The New Development of Doi Moi in Vietnam*, eds. Masaya Shiraishi and Ikuo Takeuchi (Tokyo: Asia Keizai Kenkyu-jyo, 1999), 3–22.

<sup>17)</sup> Politburo member Trường Chinh's advisory group meeting document Nov. 25, 1985.

government is making close contact with Vietnamese communities in those countries, and the assistance given to us by these people are of immense value to Viet Nam under current circumstances. The Vietnamese people living abroad have sent over 100 million US dollars to their homeland. Taking account of the outcome of the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party and the urgent state of the Vietnamese economy, the government will take further measures to facilitate temporary visit by the Vietnamese living abroad of their relatives and their homeland.<sup>18)</sup>

Such statements by high-ranking officials refer not just to the patriotic Vietnamese living abroad as was the case previously, but clearly to Vietnamese living in the U.S.<sup>19)</sup> All documented statements by SRVN and Communist Party officials are focused on the Vietnamese in America's (1) economic potential and (2) special skills and knowledge "in capitalist country" (by Hoàng Bích Sơn), which Vietnam needed urgently at that time. They illustrate the new attitude of officials who did not hesitate to discuss the implications of policy measures for the Vietnamese in the United States — a group that had been regarded as reactionary — in the planning and drafting stages of the *Đổi Mới* policy. Already at the beginning of *Đổi Mới* in 1986, the Communist Party fully recognized the potential value of Vietnamese in the U.S. in the economic reconstruction of Vietnam.

A wave of resolutions and laws followed in 1987 and continue today. Important examples falling into two categories, economic and political, include:

### (1) Economic

#### a. Remittances.

On April 11, 1987, limitations on the sending of money from overseas to relatives in Vietnam were relieved (No. 126-CT 10 April 1987).<sup>20)</sup> After that, remittance policies have changed many times.

#### b. Homeland travel.

A new policy was issued in 1987 that made it possible to visit the homeland for Vietnamese in the U.S. (No.63-HDBT). Visa fees, transportation or entrance fees at sightseeing destinations were reduced and processes for getting visas were simplified in 1997 (No.767 TTg). For those who keep a Vietnamese passport (including a South Vietnamese passport), it became unnecessary to get an immigration visa in 1999 (No.210/QD-TTg).

---

<sup>18)</sup> Institute of Southeast Asia. *Southeast Asia Directory*, Japan, 1987.; Institute of Southeast Asia. *Southeast Asia Directory*, Japan, 1987 p. 1-94.

<sup>19)</sup> Trường Chinh himself mentioned the need to attract capital from overseas Vietnamese in western countries in Bài phát biểu của đồng chí Trường Chinh tại Hội Nghị Bộ Chính Trị ban về giá-lương tiền, ngày 10-13-5-1985. See also Hoang Bich Son, "The Overseas Vietnamese Communities" Vietnam News Agency," *Vietnam Courier*, no. 5, 1987, 7-8, who discusses Vietnamese in the U.S. directly.

<sup>20)</sup> *Công báo*, (Socialist Republic of Vietnam. *Official Gazette*) Vietnam Law & Legal Forum, April 15, 1987, no. 7.

### c. Investment.

The Vietnamese government issued the Foreign Investment Law in 1992 and protocol to encourage overseas Vietnamese to invest in their homeland in 1993 (No.29-CP). They revised the protocol in 1995. In 1997, the Decree of the Government on measures encouraging overseas Vietnamese to invest in Vietnam was issued. From 2001, it was possible for an overseas Vietnamese to purchase a house in Vietnam, with limitation (No.81/ND-CP).

## (2) Political

### a. Right to Restore Vietnamese Nationality.

In 1998, the SRVN revised the Law on Nationality of Vietnam (No.7/QH10) to give Vietnamese abroad the right to restore their Vietnamese nationality. During the process of revision, there were arguments in the Party, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Law, and the National Assembly whether to include the clause “If you obtain other country’s nationality, you lose the Vietnamese nationality automatically.”<sup>21)</sup> Although the Law of Nationality articulates the principle of a single nationality, it was ultimately decided that existing Vietnamese citizens would only lose their nationality if they formally renounced it.<sup>22)</sup>

### b. Expanding the “Vietnamese Nation.”

Also, the Communist party proclaimed the resolution (No.36 NQ/TW) and said any overseas Vietnamese are integral part of the nation.<sup>23)</sup>

### c. Improved Ties with the United States

Following the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia at the end of 1989, the George H.W. Bush Administration presented a road map for gradual normalization of the US-

<sup>21)</sup> P.V “Luật quốc tịch Việt Nam sẽ sửa đổi” *Quê Hương*, Số 8, 1997 (51), 31.

<sup>22)</sup> “Quốc hội thảo luận luật quốc tịch (sửa đổi)” *Quê Hương*, Số 5, 1998 (60), 7.

<sup>23)</sup> The resolution reads, “All Vietnamese, regardless of their nationalities, religions and origins, social status and reasons of departure, who wish to contribute to the fulfillment of the above-said goals are welcomed to join the great national unity.” “The Party, State and Government, considering overseas Vietnamese an inseparable part of the community of Vietnamese nationalities, have adopted open policies and measures to facilitate their return for visiting family, doing business and developing cooperation in science, technology, art and culture. The policy on the overseas Vietnamese has been reformed,....however, guidelines and policies of the Party and State on overseas Vietnamese have not been fully understood and implemented. Policy studies and recommendations have not met the new requirements.....So, The State will create every favourable condition and give support for the overseas Vietnamese to stabilize their life, integrate into the society of residing countries and maintain close links with the homeland. Facilitate their return to visit their homeland, relatives and pay tribute to their ancestors; further streamline regulations on immigration, residence and travel of overseas Vietnamese in Viet Nam; Quickly process applications for repatriation or return for business or stay on definite terms in Vietnam; Continue to solve outstanding issues that involve overseas Vietnamese such as house purchase in Vietnam, inheritance, marriage and family, adoption and so on; introduce a single price system for all Vietnamese, domestic and overseas alike; Put in place an appropriate mechanism for consultations with overseas Vietnamese before the promulgation of legal documents and policies concerned. Improve existing and issue new policies on talents attraction to maximize overseas Vietnamese brainpower to the cause of national development...”



SRVN relationship that included the easing of various restrictions on travel and commerce. Among the first corporations to take advantage were AT&T and MCI, who received government clearance to begin direct telecommunications services in April 1992. In February 1994, the US trade embargo on Vietnam was lifted by President Clinton and, in 1995, diplomatic relations between the two countries were formally established. On July 13, 2000, a bilateral trade agreement was signed and four months later, Clinton paid an historic visit to Vietnam.

### **3. The Impact of *Đổi Mới* and Diplomatic Relations: What, if Anything, is Changing for Vietnamese in the US?**

Although Vietnamese in the U.S. remained skeptical about the government's motives, and activists continued their adversarial stance, the available evidence, provided by my survey<sup>24)</sup> as well as various SRVN departments and other secondary published Vietnamese sources, suggests that the reforms have, in fact, helped to achieve economic objectives. At the same time, there appears to be little impact on the political attitudes of Vietnamese in America, as anti-communist attitudes have, on the surface at least, solidified over time.

Below, I present the evidence — first, that which concerns economic activities; second, that which concerns political attitudes and behavior.

#### **(1) Economic Impact**

##### **a. Remittances.**

The value of remittances being sent from overseas Vietnamese reached \$3 billion in 2004 and 80% of those are from Vietnamese in the U.S., according to the Vietnamese government. This, as Graph 1 indicates, represents a substantial growth since 1991 — and the continuation of a fairly consistent upward trend since 1997.

In the poll in 2003, 57% answered that they have, at some point since living in the States, sent money to someone they know in Vietnam.

##### **b. Homeland Travel.**

At the beginning, Vietnamese in the U.S. were cautious of the new policies regarding return trips to Vietnam. However, once those who had visited came back to the U.S. safely, the number of those who returned increased rapidly. In 2004, the number of overseas Vietnamese who visited the homeland, as shown in Graph 2, exceeded 400,000,<sup>25)</sup> 8 times higher than the number who returned in 1990.

The individual-level data give some support to these government-provided statistics. Overall, 53% report in the 2003 poll that they have been back to Vietnam, — a substantial

---

<sup>24)</sup> The poll of 500 Vietnamese in the U.S. was conducted by telephone in Orange County between September and October 2003. Respondents were 18 years and older and met screening criteria designed to verify their Vietnamese ethnicity. Naturalized and Vietnam-born percentages in the poll data are 97% and 98%, respectively — higher than Census figures cited above.

<sup>25)</sup> Document provided by Que Huong, Jan. 17 2005.

increase from those who reported doing so in the 2000 *Orange County Register* Poll (37%).

The poll also sheds light on the reasons why some individuals have not traveled to Vietnam. Because in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some community political activists viewed travel to Vietnam as an activity equivalent to supporting the communist regime, several have refused, on principle, to make the trip. Thus, if poll respondents offer a political reason for not going to Vietnam, it would underscore the intense politicization of community and the influence of activist pressure.

However, when those who say they have not gone to Vietnam are asked why, 52% explain that their reasons are economic (i.e., that the trip is beyond their economic means). Explicitly political reasons (i.e., direct mentions of the political situation or regime) constituted just 4%, while worries about safety — perhaps itself an indication of political inhibitions — constitute only 1% of all responses. Reasons of health and age were cited by 6% of the non-travelers.

#### c. Investment.

Investment by overseas Vietnamese stalled until the mid-1990s. A total of 51 projects were approved by the Vietnamese government between 1988 and 1994, but only 37 were, in fact, initiated. Investment by Vietnamese in the U.S. constituted only 2 out of 15 projects in Ho Chi Minh City between 1988 and 1995. At the end of 2002, 610 projects worth US\$500 million<sup>26)</sup> were undertaken; at the end of 2003, 1,274 projects worth US\$710 million<sup>27)</sup> were undertaken. Although the investment climate has improved since the early 1990s, we are unable to ascertain the specific impact of Vietnamese in the U.S. investments since the government has not provided such data.

## (2) Political Impact

Through the polling data and other empirical observations, I am able to assess the possible impact of Noai Moui and improved diplomatic relations on several attitudinal and behavioral dimensions, including:

#### a. Impressions of the Vietnamese Government.

Although, the amount of interaction with Vietnam is increasing, strong, negative impressions persist toward the government. In the 1994 Times Poll, 59% answered “unfavorable” to the question: “What is your impression of the current government of Viet Nam?” In 2003, 77% answered “unfavorable” to the same question (with 63% saying “very” unfavorable). Among those who have been back to Vietnam one time, the impressions of the government are even lower — although we can see some lessening of “very” unfavorable attitudes among the more frequent visitors (Graph 3).

#### b. Attitudes toward US Policy in VN.

Vietnamese in Orange County also have ambivalent views about US policy toward

<sup>26)</sup> “Mother Country Nets Half a Billion from its Viet kieu,” *Thời báo kinh tế-Vietnam Economy*, Jan. 20, 2003 (Internet Version)

<sup>27)</sup> Quynh Anh, “A Good Earning from Overseas Vietnamese Remittance,” *Thời báo kinh tế-Vietnam Economy*, Feb.4, 2004 (Internet version).

Vietnam. When asked to “rate the way in which the United States government is currently dealing with Vietnam,” just 18% say “excellent” or “good”. Forty-six percent say “fair”, while 13% say “poor.” Twenty percent say they are unsure.

When the rating of US policy toward Vietnam is crosstabulated by the respondents’ frequency of travel to Vietnam, an interesting pattern emerges, as indicated in Table 1 below. Among those who have never traveled to Vietnam, 23% say US policy is “excellent” or “good”; among those who are repeat travelers, 13% say US policy is “excellent” or “good.” Similarly, the percentage of those saying “fair” or “poor” increases along with increased travel to Vietnam.

c. Willingness to Go back to Vietnam.

In the 1981 survey cited above, 94% answered that they “want to go back to the homeland someday.”<sup>28)</sup> In 1994, the Los Angeles Times Poll posed a similar question, but added a political caveat: “If the current Vietnamese government fell and democracy were established in Vietnam, would you move to Vietnam to live permanently, or would you stay in the U.S.?” Thirty-six percent said they would move back. In 2003, I repeated the Times’ question and the proportion saying they would “move back to Vietnam” declined to 20%. When the results are crosstabulated by the incidence of travel to Vietnam, we see no significant differences: among those who have visited Vietnam and those who have not (Graph 4).

Looking at the data differently, among those who say they would stay in the U.S., 46% have been back to Vietnam and 60% said they pay attention to news and current events taking place in Vietnam “very” or “somewhat” closely. In other words, the desire to stay in the U.S. does not necessarily mean a loss of interest in Vietnam.

d. Pressure or Overthrow.

As Vietnam has modified its policies, and relations with the United States have broadened, the platforms of anti-communist organizations have changed as well. Their purpose used to be

Table 1 Crosstabulation of Vietnamese in the U.S. Rating of US Policy Toward Vietnam x Frequency of Vietnam Travel

Source: Authors Poll of Vietnamese in Orange County, 2003.

		<i>Never traveled to VN</i>	<i>Traveled one time</i>	<i>Traveled more than one time</i>
		%	%	%
US Policy on VN is...	Excellent	4	4	3
	Good	19	11	10
	Fair	36	40	48
	Poor	7	13	10
	Dont Know/Unsure	30	25	25

<sup>28)</sup> C. Beth Baldwin, *Capturing the Change: The Impact of Indochinese Refugees in Orange County: Challenges and Opportunities* (Santa Ana: Immigrant and Refugee Planning Center, 1982), 96.

to “overthrow the government, liberate the homeland,” with some intending to do so by force. As some of the more militant organizations were dissolved; others modified their approach to a focus on democracy and human rights. Polling data reveals a similar change in temperament among the community at large. In 1994, to the question “Do you think democracy can be achieved in Viet Nam by putting the right kind of pressure on the current regime, or will the current regime have to be overthrown and replaced in order to establish democracy?” 31% answered “right kind of pressure” and 37 % answered “overthrown and replaced.” In 2003, those saying the “right kind of pressure” grew to 53%, while those wanting to “overthrow” the government declined to 21%

### **Candidates Who Fight the Vietnamese Government.**

Before 2000, there was only one elected official of Vietnamese descent serving in local government in California. As of this writing in 2005, Vietnamese Americans had elected a member of the California Assembly, two city council members, and assumed a majority on the five-person Board of Trustees in the Garden Grove Unified School District. In the 2003 poll, Vietnamese Americans in Orange County who were registered to vote were asked about the qualities they felt to be most important when they cast a ballot for a particular candidate. While 59% say it is “very” or “somewhat” important that their candidates “help people in Vietnam”, 66% say it is “very” or “somewhat” important that their candidates “fight the government of Vietnam” (Graph 5). The most important quality for Vietnamese American voters, according to the survey, is that candidates “work to help Vietnamese in the U.S.

### **Conclusion**

The variety of data presented here suggests that the impact of *Đổi Mới* and diplomatic relations has had greater reach on the economic behavior of Vietnamese in America than on their political or social attitudes. More are going back to Vietnam; the amount of remittances has grown; the number of investments by Vietnamese in the U.S. shows promise. Yet anti-government attitudes are, if anything, becoming entrenched. As Vietnamese émigrés become more familiar with, and active within the American political system, they are, in a sense, becoming more democratic in their expressions of anti-communism. The results showing a decline in the percentage of those wanting to “overthrow” the government support this point, as do the dramatic increases in the number of Vietnamese American elected officials in recent years. Yet at the same time they are learning how to participate in the American democratic system, Vietnamese in America are channeling lingering anti-communist sentiments to representatives who respond to, as well as perpetuate, such sentiments. This is evidenced by the number of symbolic measures introduced by Vietnamese American officials to support of the flag of South Vietnam and successful efforts, such as those in the cities of Westminster and Garden Grove in 2004, to declare such areas “communist free zones.”

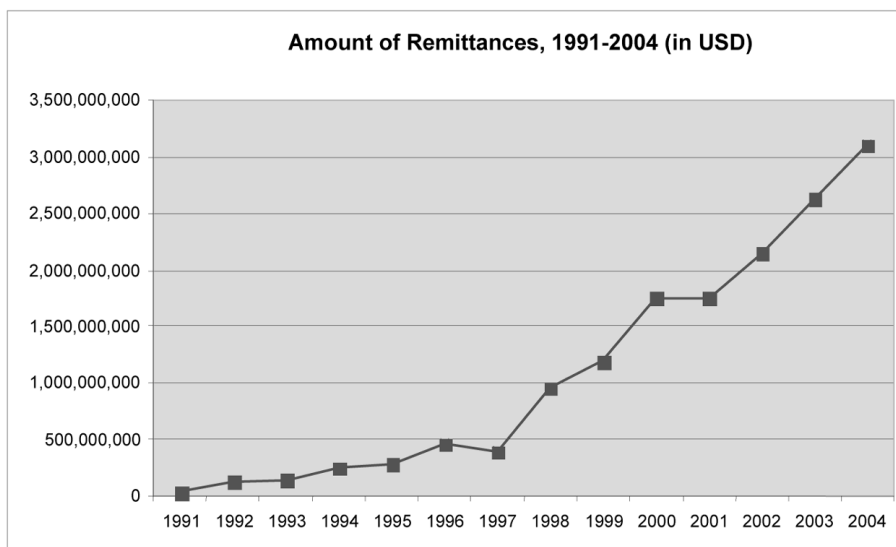
How can we reconcile the willingness to engage with Vietnam with the unwillingness to engage with its government? Perhaps there is a rationale in this dichotomy. Vietnamese in the

U.S. return to their homeland because they have come to disconnect the idea of helping their family and friends from the idea of helping the government. This would signify a small, but perhaps significant, shift from the 1980s and early 1990s when economic support was seen by activists as something akin to regime support.

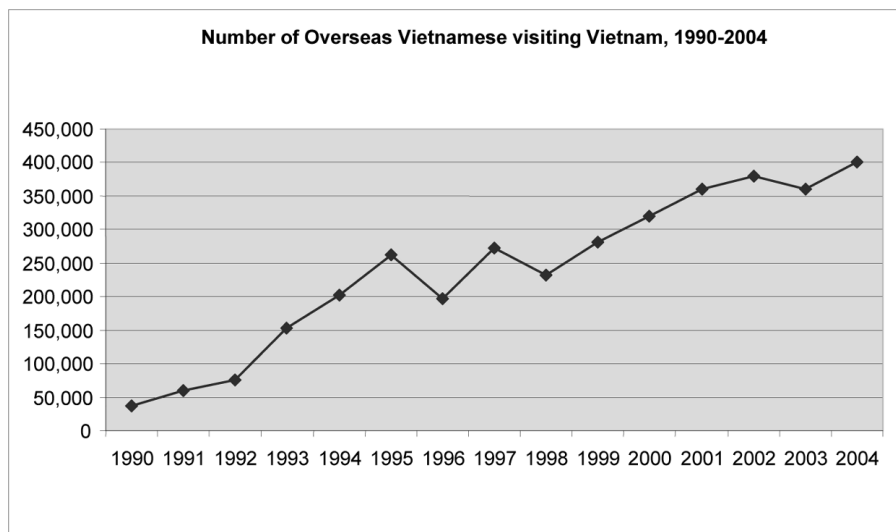
The findings have implications for the study of Asian Americans and transnationalism. In spite of considerable diplomatic and political obstacles at both the macro- and micro-levels, as well as geographic distance, Vietnamese in the United States established transnational networks to sustain their family and friends left behind in Vietnam. Furthermore, the networks appear to have contributed to policy changes within the Vietnamese government and to be playing an important role in the SRVN's efforts to renovate a centralized economic system. Yet a wide gulf remains between Vietnamese in the US and the SRVN on issues relating to Vietnam's political system. Future research on Asian Americans would benefit from a deeper examination of economic and political forms of transnationalism between the US and sending societies, and a deeper understanding of how one form of transnationalism, if at all, may affect the other. As considerable methodological hurdles remain in studying political transnationalism in the Vietnamese case, studies of other countries, such as China, may help to develop theory that can be later applied back to illuminate the Vietnamese in America-SRVN relationship.

**Graph 1 Amount of Remittances, 1991-2004 (in USD)**

Sources: 1991-1998: *Vietnam Economic News*. No.50 1999 p.12; 1998-2004: Document provided by *Quê Hương*, Jan.17, 2005.

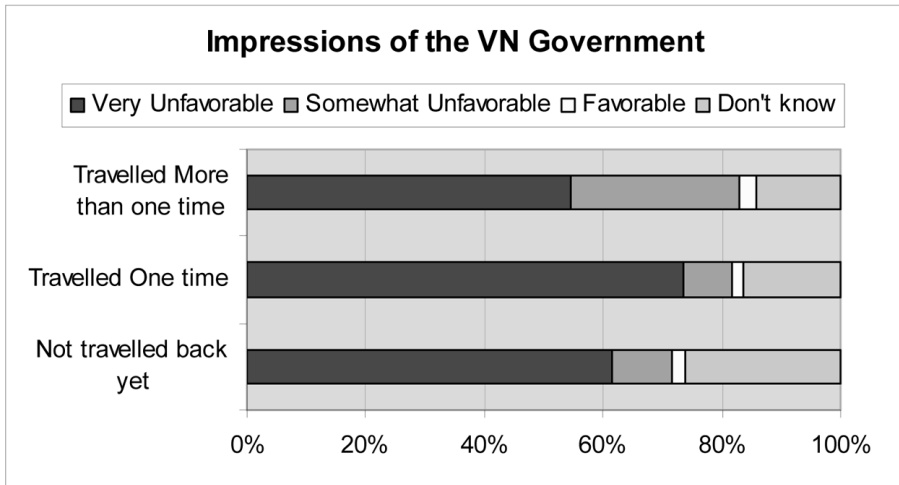
**Graph 2 Number of Overseas Vietnamese visiting Vietnam, 1990-2004**

Sources: 1990-1994: Cộng Hoà Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam Tổng Cục Thống Kế, *Niên Giám Thống Kế*, Nhà Xuất Bản Thống Kế 1994, 1995-2004: Documents provided by *Quê Hương*.



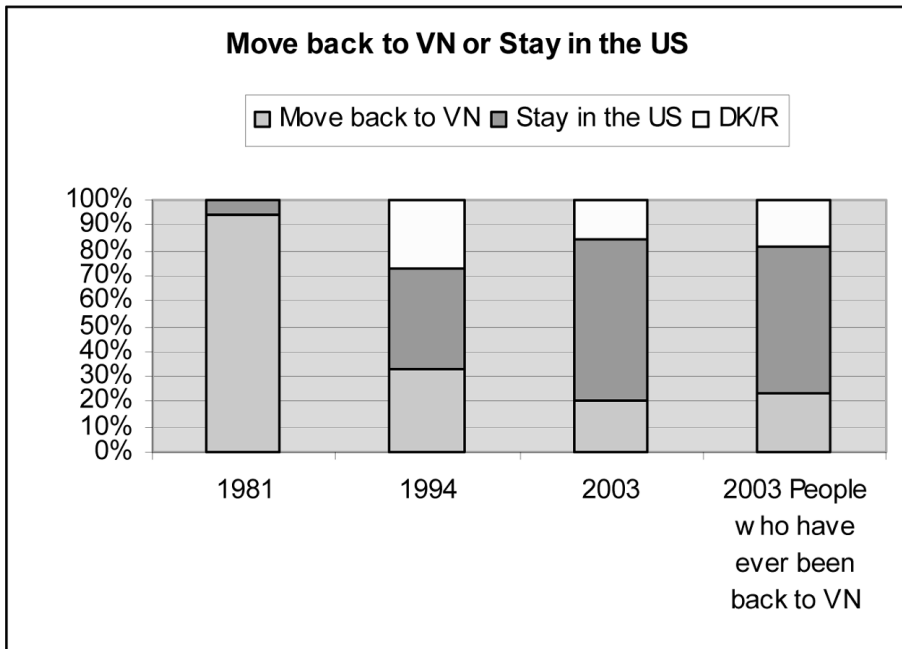
**Graph 3 How Orange County Vietnamese in the U.S. Rate the Government of Vietnam x Frequency of Travel to Vietnam**

Sources: Author's Poll of Vietnamese in Orange County, 2003.



**Graph 4 Percentage of Orange County Vietnamese in the U.S. Who Say They Would Move Back to Vietnam (if it were Democratic), 1981-2003**

Sources: Baldwin (1982); 1994 Los Angeles Times Poll; Author's Poll of Vietnamese in Orange County, 2003.



**Graph 5 Percentage of Orange County Vietnamese Americans Saying it is Important that Their Representatives Fight the Vietnamese Government**  
Source: Author's Poll of Vietnamese in Orange County, 2003.

