

## **Graduate Research Essay**

# **FORMS OF BELONGING: 'AUTHENTICITY' IN AN AUCKLAND VIETNAMESE TEMPLE**

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Ong Hung emigrated from Vietnam to New Zealand in 1993, when he was in his late twenties. A quick learner with an aptitude for fixing things, it was his ambition to study at university in Auckland. However, he arrived speaking no English, and failed to gain fluency. Dreams of career advancement through education had to be laid to rest. All of the work he has done in New Zealand has been labour-intensive and with other Vietnamese: as a house painter, and then, more recently, in factory jobs in different parts of Auckland. He also repairs electronic appliances from home. His total working time per week averages 55 hours. Like many unmarried Vietnamese in Auckland, he lives with his parents.

The only ethnic association Ong Hung attends is the Giac Nhien temple in Avenue Road, Otahuhu. He goes at least every Sunday, and plays badminton with other temple-goers on Saturday afternoon. Ong Hung was not always such an enthusiastic devotee. In Vietnam he visited a temple just once a year. But attendance in Auckland became important to him for a number of reasons:

ONG HUNG: I thought about when you get older: you need to go to church.

Q: So your ideas have changed?

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ONG HUNG: Yeah [laughs].<sup>2</sup>

He went to the temple to study Buddhism, to make friends, and because otherwise ‘at the weekend, nowhere to go.’<sup>3</sup>

New Zealand had not offered him everything he wanted, but it has provided his family with political freedom and a reasonable income. He foresees that the Hanoi government will fall from power, and when it does he would like to return to his homeland permanently.

Until he left Vietnam in 1993, communist-regime oppression was a major part of Ong Hung’s life. His father had been an employee of an American corporation and was, after 1975, subjected to 18 months in a re-education camp. From then until his departure to New Zealand in 1993, the taint of ‘imperialist’ connections meant Ong Hung, like his siblings, was barred from entry to university. Leaving Vietnam for New Zealand as a migrant was a drawn out and costly exercise. Having settled, he and his family faced a new set of challenges: the quotidian struggle of being a stranger, of suffering homesickness, the need for friendship and the desire to maintain Vietnamese culture. Ong Hung, like most adult Vietnamese Aucklanders who have sought these things, has done so through informal networks and religious groups – Saint Bernadette’s Catholic Parish in Bailey Street, Mt Wellington, a Protestant congregation in South Auckland, and two Buddhist temples, one in Mangere, the other in Otahuhu.



FIG. 2: A Sense of Community: A Birthday Celebration at Giac Nhien temple. Otahuhu, 2001. Photo courtesy of Giac Nhien temple.

This article uses the Otahuhu temple’s community as a case study to explore

<sup>2</sup> Ong Hung, interview, 17 June 2001. NB: the names of interview subjects have been altered to ensure confidentiality. ‘Ong’ designates a male subject, ‘Ba’ a female.

<sup>3</sup> Ong Hung, interview, 17 June 2001.

issues of authenticity, adaptation and belonging. Based on interviews with 31 Auckland Vietnamese, it describes an attempt to create a cultural 'home' in a city in which migrants and refugees have often felt alien and alone.<sup>4</sup> The study corroborates the sense of displacement and powerlessness that Australian anthropologist Mandy Thomas suggests haunts the daily lives of many immigrant Vietnamese.<sup>5</sup> However, where Thomas' work sees private homes as the only place where, largely unfettered, 'a Vietnamese cultural aesthetic' can be expressed, my research shows how the Buddhist pagoda has extended just that aesthetic and its sense of empowerment into a public domain.<sup>6</sup> So often 'outsiders' within the host society, Vietnamese have attended the temple to be part of an environment that they feel is theirs. At a time of rapid cultural change and in the face of Vietnamese young people's integration into the host society, the temple attempts to foster a clear, tradition-centered Vietnamese identity. This is evident in its 'authentic' material surroundings as well as in the behaviour expected of attendees.

As will become clear, the family unit is a major preoccupation within the collective enterprise of ethnicity. Transmitting Vietnamese culture is, in fact, understood to be a prerequisite for family cohesion. To learn to accord their parents due respect, children of refugees and migrants are immersed within Vietnamese language, religious life and heritage at the temple. While this, and the temple's general role as a 'cultural conservator', has been noted in earlier studies, the mechanisms by which traditional hierarchical values are passed on to young people have seldom been made clear.<sup>7</sup> This, along with oral accounts

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<sup>4</sup> This sample was drawn from the 3500 Vietnamese resident in New Zealand. Most of that population is connected to the refugee flow precipitated by the reunification of Vietnam in April 1975. Between 1977 and 2000 the New Zealand Government accepted more than 4000 Vietnamese refugees for resettlement in New Zealand on grounds of humanitarianism, perceived utility within the host economy and, especially in the early 1980s, pre-existent family links in New Zealand. Another 4000 gained residency under family reunification schemes or through private sponsorship. Since their arrival in the late 1970s the majority of adult Vietnamese in New Zealand – as throughout the West – have worked in semi-skilled or unskilled positions. A large number, after gaining New Zealand citizenship, resettled in Australia. ('Refugee Quota – applicants approved', Department of Immigration, available online at: [http://www.immigration.govt.nz/research\\_and\\_information/statistics/RQ1.xls](http://www.immigration.govt.nz/research_and_information/statistics/RQ1.xls) (March 2003); [http://www.gate.whs.school.nz:8080/Intranet/Depts/SocialSci/Geography/Form\\_7/resources/approved\\_resid\\_region.html+%2219+286+157%22&hl=en&ie=UTF-8](http://www.gate.whs.school.nz:8080/Intranet/Depts/SocialSci/Geography/Form_7/resources/approved_resid_region.html+%2219+286+157%22&hl=en&ie=UTF-8) (August 2003); Trung Tran, 'Deconstructing the 'asian' Other: A Case Study of the Vietnamese Community in Auckland', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1997, pp.117-21.)

<sup>5</sup> See Mandy Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows: Vietnamese Australian Lives in Transition*, St Leonards, NSW, 1999, pp.29-31, 34, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.47.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'cultural conservator' is Damien McCoy's; see 'From Hostel to Home: Immigration, Resettlement and Community – the Ethnic-Vietnamese in Australia, 1975-1995', PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, p.300. For discussions of the cultural maintenance role of overseas Vietnamese Buddhist associations, see Louis-Jacques Dorais, 'Religion and Refugee Adaptation: The Vietnamese in Montreal', *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 21, 1, 1989, pp.20-22, 24; James M. Freeman, *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives*, Stanford, 1989, pp.395-6; McCoy, 'From Hostel to Home,' pp.298-302; Janet McLellan, *Many Petals of the Lotus: Five Asian Buddhist Communities in Toronto*, Toronto,

of how young people have reacted to pressure to be 'Vietnamese', are aspects of the current discussion.

### **Building the temple**

The temple in Avenue Road, Otahuhu, is the most substantial of the South and Southeast Asian Buddhist pagodas in Auckland. A religious ceremony is held each Sunday, and most Vietnamese arrive at this service by car. The drive there takes them through Otahuhu's multiple ethno-religious communities: Sri Lankans, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Lao, Khmer Krom, Cambodians, Europeans and Pacific Islanders attend religious services in this and the neighbouring suburbs of Mangere and Papatoetoe. The Vietnamese temple is located on a 4000m<sup>2</sup> section, with tall, mature trees and two main buildings: the larger contains the Buddha Hall, two dining rooms, a big kitchen, bathrooms, and the bedrooms of the eight inhabitants, six of whom are sangha (Buddhist monks and nuns). The smaller building, a converted garage, serves as a school room and storage area. Outside the Buddha Hall a paved area displays topiary and a large incense holder. To one side a Chinese-style garden has been built, the centrepiece of which is a pond and ornamental bridge in classical style. A tall, white statue of Quan Am (Avalokiteshvara, the Goddess of Mercy) stands beside the pond.

The Avenue Road property is the third premises to have housed the Vietnamese Buddhist Association. The first services were not conducted at a temple at all, but at the home of one devotee in Panama Road, Mt. Wellington. Beginning in 1988, the living room was turned over each weekend for a religious service.<sup>8</sup> There was no resident monk or nun, but Vietnamese Venerables from Australia would periodically visit Auckland and provide a service and sermon. On special occasions a hall would be hired.<sup>9</sup>

The first permanent pagoda was established in 1991 in a former State House in Fairburn Road, Otahuhu.<sup>10</sup> This working-class neighbourhood offered relatively cheap property. Located close to the Mangere refugee centre – around which many Vietnamese had settled – it was a logical place to form the centre point of a community. Thich Truong Sanh, a Vietnamese monk from Hue who had lived in Australia since the early 1990s, became the resident bhikkhu (monk) and abbot. The Buddhist Association received some assistance from government funding bodies, but the bulk of the mortgage was paid for by devotees.<sup>11</sup>

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1999, pp.115, 126-32, 193-4; Paul Rutledge, *The Role of Religion in Ethnic Self-Identification*, New York, 1985, p.56.

<sup>8</sup> Thay, personal correspondence, 26 October 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Ong Trung, interview, 1 November 2001; Thay, personal correspondence, 26 October 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Thay, personal correspondence, 26 October 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Ong Trung, interview, 1 November 2001.

In December 1995 the association bought the current premises in Avenue Road.<sup>12</sup> The previous owners were Chinese Buddhists, who sold for around \$150,000-\$200,000 – less than its market value. By 2001 the property was mortgage free.<sup>13</sup> At the time the new premises were occupied, Thich Truong Sanh invited a Burmese Theravadan monk to live at the temple, to be joined by two young Vietnamese bhikkhus, one a refugee, the other a migrant. In December 2001 two nuns from Hue arrived at the temple on New Zealand visitor permits. They were warmly received by local Vietnamese, especially the temple's female attendees, and agreed to extend their stay of six months to a period of two years.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of 2002 a new bedroom was constructed for them, and the women's washing facilities were upgraded. Meanwhile, a large paved area was constructed on the east side of the property. These renovations and the arrival of the nuns contributed to the friendly, settled and prosperous air of the temple. They were made possible because of the financial contribution of Vietnamese Buddhist families.



FIG. 4: The New Paved Area Outside Giac Nien Temple. Note the large incense holder (centre). The flags to either side are Buddhist. Otahuhu, 2002. Author's collection.

The donations of time, money and resources are remarkable given how little many refugee and immigrant families have to live on. Most first-generation adult Vietnamese have remained in working-class jobs, focused on paying off their own mortgages, supporting their children, and assisting kin still in Vietnam. To also contribute to the upkeep of a religious association and its

<sup>12</sup> Thay, personal correspondence, 26 October 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Ong Trung, interview, 1 November 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Thay, personal correspondence, 26 October 2002.

eight inhabitants suggests just how important the temple has been for these families. One key to its success has been that it allows Vietnamese to spend time in a space that can accommodate the social forms of their homeland.

#### Emptiness

Vietnamese interviewees often remarked how isolated they felt during their first years in New Zealand. Partly this was a product of the dispersion of refugees to the location of their sponsors.<sup>15</sup> Initially scattered throughout the country, Vietnamese soon gravitated to the main centres, particularly Auckland. It was here that, to some extent, refugees were offered the attraction of a ‘critical mass’ of fellow Vietnamese.<sup>16</sup> Auckland was a place where their language could be spoken, where Vietnamese and Chinese cooking ingredients could be bought, and where Vietnamese books, magazines, videos and audiotapes could be shared or traded. However, while the city’s Vietnamese social life was an improvement on the slim pickings available in rural New Zealand, feelings of alienation and loneliness persisted.

The housing arrangements in which Vietnamese found themselves bore directly upon this sense of isolation. Vietnamese were facing Western conceptions of public and private space that had never predominated in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> The Mekong village was conventionally a settlement where kin lived together in the same house or as neighbours.<sup>18</sup> Formal spatial boundaries – at least for minors – were absent under these circumstances. Anthropologist Gerald Hickey has written:

Children have the run of the section of the hamlet where they live; they may wander into the neighbors’ houses without fear of being punished. Indeed, in most cases, neighbors are likely to be kinfolk, so they are welcomed as members of the family.<sup>19</sup>

For Hickey, being part of this communal, familial space was vital to

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<sup>15</sup> See Moore, ‘Strangers to the Country’, pp.27, 90-92.

<sup>16</sup> Nicola H. North, ‘Crossing the Sea: Narratives of Exile and Illness among Cambodian Refugees in New Zealand’, PhD thesis, Massey University, 1995, p.40. For a discussion of the mental-health benefits of a sizeable co-ethnic community, see H.B.M. Murphy, ‘The Low Rate of Hospitalization Shown by Immigrants in Canada’, in *Uprooting and After*, Charles Zwingmann and Maria-Pfister-Ammende, eds, New York, 1973, pp.221-31.

<sup>17</sup> This is changing. Having one’s own bedroom, or a house that is separate (a *nha rieng*) from that of one’s family, is currently a status symbol in Vietnam. (Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.107.)

<sup>18</sup> In the 1980s in Australia, one study ranked proximity of kin as the number-one reason for Vietnamese residential location. (Nancy Viviani, *The Long Journey: Vietnamese Migration and Settlement in Australia*, Melbourne, 1984, p.229.) See also Louis-Jacques Dorais, Lise Pilon-Le and Nguyen Huy, *Exile in a Cold Land: A Vietnamese Community in Canada*, New Haven, 1987, p.143.

<sup>19</sup> Hickey, p.111. Thomas notes how, in present-day Hanoi, lack of domestic space brings many activities, which Westerners would rank as ‘domestic’, into the public world. ‘Three generations usually live together, and because this restricts utilizable space a lot of activities are performed on the street—washing clothes, washing dishes, cooking, working (fixing machines, sewing, homework), cleaning teeth, washing the body, watching television, and talking, playing cards and arguing.’ (Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.106)

Vietnamese self-identity. According to Hanoi resident Ba Hau, this continues to be so today. She was highly consciousness of how neighbourhood social relations and obligations were a measure of individual worth:

BA HAU: The old values [are] still meant, I think so. We talk about everything, everyone, in married life, between neighbours, I mean between everyone. And that's very important in relationship[s]. If you're a person who doesn't have *nghia* [duty, justice and obligation] you are worthless [laughs a little].<sup>20</sup>

War and displacement sometimes robbed interviewees of the social environment and networks that Ba Hau describes. A feeling of being 'ungrounded' continued in Auckland because of separation from kin and the physical distance between Vietnamese homes. In Auckland, Ong Son had experienced – then gradually overcome – the feeling of not belonging to the neighbourhood in which he lived:

ONG SON: At the beginning every Vietnamese, probably every refugee- The first five year [sic] I always think 'this is European country, this is foreigner. This is not my street.'<sup>21</sup>



FIG. 5: Suburban Life? Ong Son's street. Papatoetoe, 2002. Author's collection.

That he invoked the street in particular as the place to which one does or does not belong accords with Hickey's comments. My younger interviewees, asked about life in Vietnam, responded with enthusiastic descriptions of Vietnam's neighbourhood-based social world – crowded, lively, full of friends and food:

ONG CHIEN: [In Nha Trang] the place I live is very cool, it's very busy. So just, when you go on the street you see some friend, and you all speaking the same language. And because I was still in

<sup>20</sup> Ba Hau, interview, 13 August 2001. Emphasis added. For an extended definition of *nghia* see Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, Berkeley, 1993, p.19.

<sup>21</sup> Ong Son, interview, 27 July 2001.



school over there, and I have quite a lot of friend, when I go I quite miss it.<sup>22</sup>

BA DUYEN: [In Saigon] there's always something to do, and people sell food on the streets. They used to sell outside my house. And there's a lot of food. You can buy it any time you want.<sup>23</sup>

BA HAU: Hanoi is very crowded and the land is very narrow, so people just live next to each other. They can know everything about your house, about your family. If you quarrel, for example, they will know immediately... If you look at our way of living you might think that Vietnamese people are quite curious, or quite nosy [laughs]. They care too much about you. But, I mean, according to our culture that's the proper way of doing *nghia* – that they care about each other.<sup>24</sup>



FIG. 6: Street Life in Hanoi during Tet 2002. Author's collection.

Gradually, Ba Hau has come to appreciate the privacy available in New Zealand. During interviews, both she and Ong Chien articulated a trade-off between the attractive material conditions and opportunities in Auckland, and the feelings of alienation and isolation they felt here.<sup>25</sup> But the change in social environments was a difficult one for them, and this has been the experience of

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<sup>22</sup> Ong Chien, interview, 15 July 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Ba Duyen, interview, 23 August 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Ba Hau, interview, 13 August 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Ba Hau, interview, 13 August 2001; Ong Chien, interview, 15 July 2001.



many Vietnamese in Auckland and around the world.<sup>26</sup> Refugees and migrants to this country suffered not only from the memories of what they left behind, but also the boredom and seeming emptiness of the social space they had come to inhabit. Ong Chien lamented, 'When you live in a house, and look around, on the street, there's nobodies'.<sup>27</sup> Another Vietnamese teenager told me, 'The community over here it's not as much. It's quite sad sometimes. Because you can't play with your friends or something like that.'<sup>28</sup> Ong Trung explained that a lot of younger people originating from the bigger Vietnamese cities felt this way, and as a consequence they often moved on to join the large Vietnamese populations in Melbourne and Sydney. Refugee Ong Son believed Australia was the best place for Vietnamese elderly as well. There simply were not the social opportunities for them in Auckland that Australian-Vietnamese communities offered.<sup>29</sup>

The limits of the social world for Vietnamese in Auckland, and the privacy/distance imposed by the city's housing arrangements, makes the Vietnamese Buddhist Association and other formal social groups so important. At the temple the 'Western' distinction between public and private spheres is replaced by something reminiscent of Vietnamese conceptions of space. For those who attend, the religious groups have become an opportunity not only to worship together, but to work and socialise with other Vietnamese according to principles which, in this city, do not ordinarily apply.

### **Culture corrosion, culture collision**

The rarity in Auckland of public spaces on the Vietnamese pattern gives the temple a special place within the community. Temples and churches have also succeeded and sustained themselves by catering to a desire for the ethical, cultural, and linguistic education of the young – seen by many parents to be seriously wanting. Since the late 1970s refugee adults in the West have watched their children grow up in ways which deviated from the cultural norms of the homeland, and this has been of grave concern.<sup>30</sup> At stake, according to interviewees, has been to some extent an abstract value attached to knowledge of the Vietnamese heritage but, more so, a practical concern for community.

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<sup>26</sup> See Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, pp.103-14.

<sup>27</sup> Ong Chien, interview, 15 July 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Ba Hanh's daughter, interview, 5 May 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Ong Son, interview, 27 July 2001. For a discussion of elderly Vietnamese own, often critical, reactions to life in Australia see T. Thomas and M. Balvares, *New Land, Last Home: The Vietnamese Elderly and the Family Migration Program*, Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, Canberra, 1993; McCoy, pp.215-20; Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, pp.80-5, 198.

<sup>30</sup> See Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*, Princeton, 1993, pp.144-166; Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, pp.71-80; Paul Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1992, pp.121-32.

First, there has been a desire to ensure that younger Vietnamese remain in contact with the broader ethnic base. Second, and most crucial, has been concern that parents and their children have a common interface – cultural and linguistic – through which to communicate. One interviewee, who arrived in New Zealand in 1990, aged nine, worried that her Vietnamese language skills were limited, as was the English of her parents:

BA DUYEN: I only have a limited vocabulary [in Vietnamese], and sometimes I find it hard to express my emotions. People don't really understand me that well.

Q: So have you got- You've got a good accent, but just not a very good vocab?

BA DUYEN: I'm losing the accent [laughs]. It's not a real accent. It's a Kiwi accent. Terrible! Because usually Vietnamese people they have a north or a south or a middle accent, but I don't have any of those.<sup>31</sup>

Vietnamese language ability has been one of the most obvious casualties of young people's integration into mainstream Auckland. As a language gap has appeared, ethical values have also been questioned, reinterpreted and sometimes discarded. The love and respect traditionally owed to the elderly, the authority of the father and his right to physically discipline wife and children, the dutiful behaviour demanded by parents of children, and the importance of female chastity – regarded as fundamental to ethnic identity by older Vietnamese – have not fared well in the West.<sup>32</sup>

For Ba Duyen, attending a Vietnamese Catholic service was a 'conscious choice' to try to bridge the cultural chasm between her 'modern', 'Western', New Zealand upbringing and the ethnic heritage which her parents embodied. She shared the feelings of her parents' generation that the loss of Vietnamese language and identity was regrettable: 'The one who become really Kiwi they just forget their roots. That's a bit sad.'<sup>33</sup>

I spoke to a number of people familiar with situations where parents and children had little if any language in common. Ba Hong spent years running a Saturday class to teach children Vietnamese:

BA HONG: A lot of them talk to their [children] in English, in the broken English, because the children wouldn't understand them, or else they may speak to them in Vietnamese, and the kids will answer back in English... In fact, I wonder how much of their [Vietnamese] they [the children] understand. If you understand enough [Vietnamese to listen,] you should be able to express in the

<sup>31</sup> Ba Duyen, interview, 23 August 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, pp.76, 80; Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience*, p.124. This is an issue in Vietnam as well. (See Moore, 'Strangers to the Country', pp.99-100.

<sup>33</sup> Ba Duyen, interview, 23 August 2001.

Vietnamese language... So somewhere along the line they only know one language.<sup>34</sup>

This was the situation in Ba Chi's family. She had come to Melbourne at the age of 12, and remained fluent in Vietnamese. Her two brothers however, seven and eight years younger than her, had not acquired competence in Vietnamese. Hence parents and children found it difficult to communicate:

Q: Were your brothers encouraged to speak Vietnamese...?

BA CHI: At first my father think we should speak English, because we all speak Vietnamese at home...He encouraged us to speak English in the first place, and then we all start speaking English... with each other. We just speak in English, automatically. He [brother] doesn't speak in Vietnamese. And then when he talk to my parents, [my brothers] don't have enough vocab to speak in Vietnamese, so they keep quiet all of the time. So even though they have the opinion, but they don't know how to express it... We can talk to each other but we can't talk to the parent... And that is very sad, isn't it?<sup>35</sup>

In Vietnam, children have traditionally been exhorted to obey parents without question, but in Ba Chi's family there was intergenerational disagreement more reminiscent of mainstream Australian standards of behaviour. The brothers, she said, had little time for their father's recollections of life as a soldier and then a refugee:

They don't think deeply at all. They just do it as they want to... They say to their dad, 'If you keep talking about it [his past] I'll get sick of it. I don't want to hear it.' They can say something like that... Australians say, 'You've got to live your life, you live this now... Don't talk about the past and things like that.' That's how they live. Which is good in a way, isn't it? You shouldn't drag on the past all the time.<sup>36</sup>

While Ba Chi empathised with the mentality of her younger siblings, their behaviour towards parents was not one she felt able to emulate. By the time she left Vietnam as an adolescent:

BA CHI: The way they're teaching is already stuck in there [points to her head]. You can't say something bad to them, and say, you can't do anything what you look like... You got to think respect, you know, and your parents gave up their lives and things for you, and that's what they ask back, and you should be able to do something back by just studying.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ba Hong, interview, 17 January 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Ba Chi, interview, 24 June 2001.

<sup>36</sup> Ba Chi, interview, 24 June 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Ba Chi, interview, 24 June 2001.

Rejecting filial piety (*dao hieu*), the two brothers had, according to Ba Chi, taken a happy-go-lucky attitude to life. They focused on being ‘Australians’:

BA CHI: They think that they are Aussie.

Q: And they’re Vietnamese?

BA CHI: Yeah, Vietnamese and they think they’re Aussie. And they don’t want to have anything to do with Vietnamese. It’s, it’s, it’s sad, isn’t it? It’s sad that you are Vietnamese and you don’t think that you are.<sup>38</sup>

This interview with Ba Chi was being conducted in a room in the Vietnamese Buddhist Association temple. Two other Vietnamese were present, one of them Ong Hung – who was introduced in the beginning of the article. At this point in the discussion I turned and asked him about his sense of cultural identity. He replied, confidently, that he saw himself as Vietnamese, not as a Vietnamese-New Zealander or a ‘Kiwi’:

BA CHI: When you come over?

ONG HUNG: When? ’93.

BA CHI: Yeah, that’s very recent. You’ve already grown up. You have lots of memories there. I do have memory but it’s very vague memory. Good memory only, never sad memory. Playing with those kids and you know, even in the village. It’s never flash back, it doesn’t flash back. I don’t experience that.<sup>39</sup>

Ong Hung’s confidence in his own undiluted Vietnamese ethnicity, which Ba Chi explained in terms of his large collection of homeland memories, pleasant or otherwise, differed from the uncertain, bifurcated identity of Ba Chi and Ba Duyen. The latter’s lack of self-assurance came through strongly in our interview as she described herself being subject to cultural expectations which clashed with the realities of her social life:

Q: If you were doing a study on Vietnamese people who come to Auckland, what things would you want to study?

BA DUYEN: I think I want to study the relationship between children and parents, because it’s really hard for us to – well, the children – to communicate with their parents. I can’t tell my parents what I do in the weekend, ’cause they just get worried, and they don’t understand. So it has to be a very selective conversation.

Q: Would you just focus on that?

<sup>38</sup> Ba Chi, interview, 24 June 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Ba Chi, interview, 24 June 2001.

BA DUYEN: Like, and the other thing is that, especially there some families are really strict [sic], and don't like you to have a relationship like boyfriend and girlfriend. That's quite tough.

Q: So is your family like that?

BA DUYEN: Yeah. It's a really hard thing to grow up like that.

Q: Do you, or people in your family, keep boyfriend or girlfriend relationships secret?

BA DUYEN: They keep it secret. We don't tell our parents about that. Because my parents want us to graduate and then have a relationship. But things happen.<sup>40</sup>

Ba Ha, a recent migrant in her late 30s, talked of the double life lived by many young Vietnamese:

BA HA: Have you read the research about Asian young people in Australia?

Q: No.

BA HA: Young people, they have to wear two hats. One hat is a social hat: when they go out, to study with their mates, or workplace – social hat. When they go home they have to wear the Vietnamese hat, because it's what their parents expect. They have two lives, and they're not happy. So the parents force their children to lie to them... They can't [say], 'Mum, Dad, I want to bring my boyfriend here to introduce to you.' Or, 'Could you please let us have the relationship?' The parents don't let the girl to do it. So at night girl [says], 'Goodnight, Dad. Goodnight, Mum,' go to bed, open the window, jump out – and out. The parents didn't know [laughs].<sup>41</sup>

Vietnamese youth and their parents have responded in different ways to the competing cultural models of traditional Vietnam and mainstream New Zealand. Some young people, like Ba Chi's brothers, were unsympathetic towards their Vietnamese heritage and preferred to identify with anglophone culture. Other Vietnamese interviewees, both young and older, wished to stay in touch with their ethnic heritage and Vietnamese language. As we will see, this desire motivated them to attend the Otahuhu Buddhist temple.

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<sup>40</sup> Ba Duyen, interview, 23 August 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Ba Ha, interview, 18 May 2001. See McCoy, p.210, and Carol A. Mortland, 'Cambodian Refugees and Identity in the United States', in Linda A. Camino and Ruth M. Krulfeld, eds, *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning: Refugee Identity, Gender, and Culture Change*, Amsterdam, 1994, p.23.

## Cultural maintenance

Interviewees believed that, while being a Vietnamese was an inalienable, racial fact, the vulnerability of family, culture and language meant that ethnic identity required careful nurture. There was a risk that young Vietnamese could ‘lose that part of them’.<sup>42</sup> ‘Somehow, our culture, our language, survival [sic] for thousands of years’, Ba Ha told me. ‘And now, with the kids here, they live with the new life. So our language dying, our culture dying. And I feel sad.’<sup>43</sup>

Vietnamese identity was vulnerable in the West, but its fate was not a foregone conclusion. Transmission to the next generation was a matter of conveying the Vietnamese mindset through daily encounters. Ba Ha explained that, if parents continued to observe the Vietnamese way at home, their children would eventually come to understand its value. A draconian approach was unnecessary:

BA HA: They will come back one day. Certainly they will come back... What I mean is, the children now, they learn very quickly. Even when they are four, five years old. So you just let them go with the Kiwi life, but in your traditional life, because they are too young to understand it, they just learn from you sometimes. So you try to do your traditional thing at home. You know they learn it. They never tell you they learn it. They already learn it. And when they grow up – around eight or ten years old – they already understand it... Give your children the choice.

Q: And you think they’ll come to realise the value of the Vietnamese culture in time?

BA HA: When they’re mature they will come back, and [say, for example] ‘Dad, why Vietnamese people when they marry have to ask their parents? Why?’<sup>44</sup>

The temple, like the home, has been a place to cultivate the qualities Ba Ha refers to – especially *dao hieu* (filial piety). It extends a form of behaviour deemed Vietnamese, traditional and positive, outside the private domain of the home and into a public arena. The younger generation’s ‘Vietnamese hat’ is shown off in a space where it will be endorsed. Younger people feeling ‘lost’ (a whole generation, according to Ba Chi) can follow the example of elders who identify themselves uncomplicatedly as Vietnamese.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ba Hanh, interview, 5 May 2001.

<sup>43</sup> Ba Ha, interview, 18 May 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Ba Ha, interview, 18 May 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Ba Chi, interview, 24 June 2001.





FIG. 7: Thay and Young Vietnamese Women at Vietnamese 'Mother's Day'. The Women are in national costume. Giac Nhien temple, Otahuhu, 2002. Photo courtesy of Giac Nhien temple.

The fact that religious, ethnic and familial values are seen as one must be stressed.<sup>46</sup> The monk Thay explained what happened when families did not make the effort to attend:

Because, you know, the children, when they go to temple or go to church they can learn how to respect you. If, in New Zealand, you know, if you got children you don't take them to temple or to church, they don't allow- they don't obey you.<sup>47</sup>

Generational friction is, of course, not peculiar to Vietnamese. What Thay was pointing to, however, was that if immigrant parents like the Vietnamese did not actively instruct their children in the culture from which they came, they would find the intergenerational tension especially strong. Thay felt that children needed, first, to be taught to respect parents, and second, to be socialised to understand the mentality of their elders. If not, the children would judge, and possibly condemn, their parents according to Western criteria.

The significance of transmitting and sharing Vietnamese culture is not restricted to those who have grown up in the West. Keeping in touch with one's ethical, cultural, and spiritual heritage has been important for older Vietnamese as well. Vietnamese temples have been created outside Vietnam as places to reacquaint émigrés with Vietnamese forms. Thus historian Damien McCoy describes the Australian-Vietnamese Buddhist clergy as 'cultural

<sup>46</sup> Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience*, p.122.

<sup>47</sup> Thay, interview, 12 August 2001.

conservators'. The importance of heritage was articulated in three out of the four aims of the Vietnamese Buddhist Federation of Australia:

- to unify all Vietnamese members in different States of Australia into one Federation having its own constitution,
- to be determined to maintain our traditional religion and morality,
- to preserve and develop the Vietnamese culture,
- to relieve the sufferings of human kind by the light of Buddha, and to help building a new life conformable to the Vietnamese morality in order to restore the image of our homeland among the Vietnamese community.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, the third goal, 'to preserve and develop the Vietnamese culture,' makes no reference to Buddhist activity at all: a signal of how overseas temples have taken on a role as guardians of secular ethnic traditions.<sup>49</sup> In Auckland, Tet (Lunar New Year), the Mid-Autumn festival, and the religious events have similarly become opportunities to celebrate Vietnamese community and culture – not just Vietnamese Buddhism – through music, national costume, and so forth.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, for many Vietnamese, Buddhism lies at the heart of national culture.<sup>51</sup> A boat person attending Thich Nhat Hanh's 1991 Toronto summer retreat explained how:

I didn't belong or go to a Buddhist temple but found that I was losing my identity. Learning Buddhism has been a way of getting back to my culture. Most literature in Vietnam is Buddhist, and all the Vietnamese attitudes and values are all contained within the

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<sup>48</sup> Vietnamese Buddhist Federation of Australia, 'The Role of Vietnamese Buddhism in the Refugee Community in Australia' (paper presented at the National Consultation on Refugees, Trinity College, University of Melbourne, 3 December 1981), cited in McCoy, p.301.

<sup>49</sup> See Dorais, 'Religion and Refugee Adaptation', pp.20-22.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. McLellan, p.128.

<sup>51</sup> Scholar and monk Thich Minh Duc argues that Buddhism has been at the crux of successive struggles over Vietnamese identity. Since the era of Chinese rule in the first millennium C.E., 'Vietnamese Buddhism, blended with Confucian, Taoist, and indigenous beliefs, has become the foundation of Vietnamese culture and a central force in Vietnamese history. It was the force that unified the Vietnamese in their fight for independence from the Chinese in the eighth century and in their resistance to Chinese attempts at recolonization in the 13th and 14th centuries. Buddhism served as the protector of traditional Vietnamese culture when the French invaded in the 18th century and attempted to Christianize the population. In modern times, Buddhism served as the "national conscience" when Buddhists stood up and protested U.S. intervention during the Vietnam war. Throughout Vietnamese history, Buddhist men and women alike have contributed to preserving traditional culture, to transmitting Buddhist doctrines and values, to the struggle for independence from the French, and to the efforts for peace during the Vietnam war.' (Thich Minh Duc, 'Dam Luu: An Eminent Vietnamese Buddhist Nun', in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed, *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, Richmond, Surrey, 2000, p.104.)

scriptures. Monks and nuns are cultural embodiments while Christianity represents Western values and colonization.<sup>52</sup>

For this informant, Vietnamese Buddhism and Vietnamese culture were inseparable. In turn, the absence of Buddhist rites in everyday public life could make refugees and migrants especially conscious that they were foreign:

BA HA: Big event in Vietnam you will see the roads full of people with the nice clothes on. So even if you forget that day – ‘Oh, why people with the flowers in hand and the stick in hand? Where they going? Oh, today is the Buddha’s Birthday!’ You know what I mean? In New Zealand, you never see people on the road with the flower and the stick.<sup>53</sup>

The Buddhist religion, more so than Vietnamese Catholicism, was a mark of difference from the host society.<sup>54</sup> Vietnamese Catholics received support from the Roman Catholic Church in New Zealand. Since the mid-1980s, several Vietnamese priests and a chaplain have operated from parishes in Auckland.<sup>55</sup> Their services are in Vietnamese and they have a special mandate from the Church to provide pastoral care for their compatriots in New Zealand. In contrast, the Vietnamese Buddhists were left to their own devices. There was no convenient, pre-existing religious structure into which the first Buddhist refugees could fit:

ONG TRUNG: I’m sure in New Zealand a Catholic can go to any Catholic Church, you know. You don’t have a separate Vietnamese Catholic Church. So the Vietnamese- if the Catholic Vietnamese just tend to go to wherever there’s Catholic Church close to home. And they become like a congregation, association, there. But with the Buddhist[s], because there’s no separate- also there’s no Buddhist temple here, so they try to form, establish a separate temple to go to. That’s a difference there.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, the situation for Vietnamese Buddhists was especially pressing, not

<sup>52</sup> Boat person, in McLellan, p.128.

<sup>53</sup> Ba Ha, interview, 18 May 2001.

<sup>54</sup> Rutledge has noted how ‘Vietnamese Catholic congregations made the transition [to churches in the United States] with relative ease since Roman Catholicism is prominent in America and ethnic priests were welcomed into local parishes by resident priests... Buddhists were not as readily accepted.’ (Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience*, p.140.)

<sup>55</sup> The first priest was Father James Vo Thanh Xuan, followed, in 1990, by Father Andrew. As of 2001, the latter, while continuing as a chaplain of the Vietnamese in Auckland, and while conducting services at St Bernadette’s in Mt Wellington, is no longer its parish priest. Since the later 1980s, a Catholic nun, Sister Marie Benoit, has also served as a chaplain for the Vietnamese community throughout New Zealand. Based in Ellerslie, Auckland, she provides pastoral care, assistance with integration and welfare, as well as cultural and religious classes for young New Zealand-Vietnamese. (Sister Marie Benoit, personal correspondence, 1 December, 2002.) A third Vietnamese priest, Father Peter, serves as a chaplain for a West Auckland parish.

<sup>56</sup> Ong Trung, interview, 1 November 2001.

because Buddhist groups did not exist in Auckland, but because these groups were not practising the Vietnamese form. To some extent this was an issue for Catholic Vietnamese as well. Most Vietnamese Catholics spoke no English on their arrival and were therefore not in a position to understand hymns and sermons at mainstream Catholic Masses. Like Buddhists, Vietnamese Catholics have gone out of their way to attend a service in the Vietnamese language. One interviewee and her mother had even shifted house from West to South Auckland to be closer to the Vietnamese Catholic service and its congregation.<sup>57</sup> However, Catholic Vietnamese refugees did find it easier to fit in spiritually in Auckland. First, churches were far more common than pagodas or Buddhist centres; second, the components of a Mass are standardised by the Vatican; and third, since the mid-1980s Vietnamese priests and chaplains have been employed by the Catholic Church in New Zealand.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, the routine in a Buddhist temple is dependent on the lineage of its monks: variations in philosophy, ritual and visual form are substantial.<sup>59</sup>

The will to establish a Vietnamese pagoda led Buddhists into financial commitments beyond that of their Catholic counterparts, who have made use of existing church premises. The outlay of time and resources has had the positive effect of creating an institution for which devotees can take personal credit, and in which they have a personal stake.<sup>60</sup>

A second advantage of an independent Vietnamese Buddhist temple has been that the space is largely autonomous – sangha can express and arrange the environment according to ‘Vietnamese’ forms, secular or religious, without concessions to the sensibilities of a mainstream congregation. (This is the situation faced by the Catholic group, which has joint use of a parish.)

Ong Minh said that chairs and tables could be bought in New Zealand, of course, but it was better for them to come from Vietnam. That way, people were reminded of their culture. He said that this wasn’t happening among some Christian groups. They had no reminders of Vietnamese culture in their churches. When I mentioned the Bailey Street Catholic church as an example of this, he said that this was just what he was thinking of. There, the people had become very Western.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ba Ly, interview, 23 August 2001.

<sup>58</sup> See John Tenhula, *Voices of Southeast Asia: The Refugee Experience in the United States*, New York, 1991, p.20; Christopher Hawley, ‘The Resettlement of Indochinese Refugees’, in Andrew D. Trlin and Paul Spoonley, eds, *New Zealand and International Migration: a Digest and Bibliography, Number 1*, Palmerston North, 1986, p.69; Sister Marie Benoit, personal correspondence, 1 December, 2002.

<sup>59</sup> The same mentality has been noted by McCoy. In South Australia, prior to the construction of a Vietnamese pagoda, Vietnamese Buddhists participated in the Australian Buddhist Society, but ‘their ambition was to practice [sic] Vietnamese Buddhism; to pray using their own language, with people from their own communities, in a temple with Vietnamese icons and symbols and to practise familiar rituals’. (McCoy, p.299.)

<sup>60</sup> The support of pagodas was a traditional responsibility for Vietnamese communities. (Hickey, p.59.)

<sup>61</sup> Fieldnotes, Giac Nhien temple, Otahuhu, 4 August 2002.



FIG. 8: Taking Communion as Part of a Roman Catholic Mass in the Vietnamese Language. St Bernadette's Parish, Mt Wellington, 2002. Author's collection.

Vietnamese interviewees were particularly conscious of how the Otahuhu pagoda did or did not conform aesthetically to the temples they had known in Vietnam. Ornamental Vietnamese chairs, tables, cabinets, vases, urns, bells, drums, and other Buddhist paraphernalia produced an environment which eschewed modernity (colonial or communist), invoking an ahistorical, classical Vietnam. The food, garden, pond, bridge, potted and sculptured shrubs in 'Chinese' style, all faithfully represented the requisite Vietnamese aesthetic: antique and non-Western. Likewise the presence of nuns and monks in their grey and yellow robes, and the chanting performed by sangha and devotees. For Ba Ha, these material reminders of the homeland were reason enough to pay an occasional visit to the temple:<sup>62</sup>

Q: Is the pagoda about tradition or community for you ...?

BA HA: No, I don't go there for the community. I go there for the pagoda, and I want to listen to the chanting.<sup>63</sup>

The temple is not a time capsule. Much about it has been adapted to meet local conditions – including its architecture, the sangha's living arrangements, their routine and financial interests.<sup>64</sup> However, items which were 'authentic' operated on some level as life-sized mementos, communal souvenirs reminding refugees and migrants of an essentialised homeland, very much in the way that 'tourist' videos destined for Viet kieu homes rehearsed one national trope after the next. These well-known forms – tested for their authenticity not against

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Freeman, *Hearts of Sorrow*, p.397.

<sup>63</sup> Ba Ha, interview, 18 May 2001.

<sup>64</sup> See Moore, 'Strangers to the Country', pp.125-136.

history but against an almost platonic conception of essence – were so important for adults who discovered in mainstream Auckland little that was familiar.

### **‘Sit where your parents place you’: Authenticity through order**

The authenticity of the environment has been very important among devotees intent on recreating or consolidating what they deem traditional forms and behaviour. Interviewees were highly conscious of how the temple did or did not conform to their sense of Vietnamese-ness. The most crucial form has been that of human activity: here, gender and age distinctions are observed according to the Buddhist Vinaya and Confucian rules, creating discrete spheres of responsibility and hierarchy.

At the top of that hierarchy, Thich Truong Sanh, the abbot, fulfils the institutional equivalent of the father/husband role. He delivers sermons, leads chanting ceremonies, and is responsible for dealing with the ‘big picture’ of the temple’s running, particularly its external affairs.<sup>65</sup> A frequent traveller, the abbot leaves internal, day to day issues to his junior colleagues.<sup>66</sup>



FIG. 9: Men Build a New Kitchen for Giac Nhien Temple. Otahuhu, c.2000. Photo courtesy of Giac Nhien temple.

<sup>65</sup> See Alexander Soucy, ‘Gender and Division of Labour in a Vietnamese-Canadian Buddhist Pagoda’, MA thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, 1994, p.110. However, because the Otahuhu abbot speaks very little English, his ‘external affairs’ portfolio has been limited to dealings with other Vietnamese. The vice-abbot, or one of the lay people, is usually responsible for liaising with English-speaking visitors or officials.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Soucy, pp.111-12.



In taking on financial and maintenance responsibilities, male devotees also contribute to the temple in ways that parallel the father's conventional responsibilities within the family. While women work in the kitchen, men take care of the temple and its garden, chat together in the car park, or tinker with one of the attendees' vehicles. Their major input is in terms of regular donations for the upkeep of the temple. That these contributions are seen to come from the father-husband (or that the family is seen to be represented by the male) is evidenced by a list displayed prominently in the dining area, which tabulates the amounts pledged on a monthly basis by, in most cases, the male head.<sup>67</sup> Men's labour has also been behind a whole series of renovations and improvements to the temple.<sup>68</sup>



FIG. 10: Thich Truong Sanh and a Layman at Work in the Temple's Rose Garden. Giac Nhien Temple, Otahuhu, 2002. Photo courtesy of Giac Nhien temple.

Only some men help out through contributions of physical labour, whereas taking part in meal preparations is a task that involves almost all adult women. In fact, most of the work at the temple is done by middle-aged and elderly women who, as in Vietnam, constitute about 75% of the congregation.<sup>69</sup> Three or four will spend a large part of their Saturday in the temple kitchen preparing donated food.<sup>70</sup> Early Sunday morning they will return to ensure the meal is ready before the Buddhist service begins at 10.30am. The service concludes at 12 o'clock, at which time the food, chopsticks and bowls are distributed for between 30 and 100 guests. After the meal it is the women

<sup>67</sup> Fieldnotes, Giac Nhien temple, Otahuhu, 14 December 2002.

<sup>68</sup> Ong Trung, interview, 1 November 2001.

<sup>69</sup> Soucy's Tam Bao pagoda had a similar proportion of women devotees. (Soucy, p.92.)

<sup>70</sup> Ong Trung, interview, 1 November 2001.

who wash up.<sup>71</sup>

Preparing a free meal was part of Vietnamese women's conventional obligations to their temple, a way of accumulating *punya* ('merit'), and a communal version of their role as rulers of the domestic universe.<sup>72</sup> In Auckland, within the female sphere of the kitchen, a hierarchy is observed. The process of preparing the lunch, loud and apparently chaotic, is in fact arranged around those women most competent and most familiar with the task at hand. Cookbooks are never consulted. Recipes and skills are passed from individual to individual – ideally, from old to young. Within this network of lay women, Confucian deference to one's seniors is recognized in the terms of address that delineate age and gender hierarchies.<sup>73</sup>



FIG. 11: Thich Quang Phuc (foreground), with Women Preparing Lunch. Giac Nhien temple, Otahuhu, 2002. Author's collection.

The cult of the ancestors again reinforces the Confucian model of the family. In a room adjacent to the formal dining area, devotees offer food and make prostrations before a shrine that includes a picture of their departed relative.<sup>74</sup> Vietnamese traditions see ancestors as the source of life, as part of the kin group even after death, and as spirits who continue to exert an influence, for

<sup>71</sup> Ba Nga, interview, 17 March 2002; Ong Trung, interview, 1 November 2001.

<sup>72</sup> Ong Chien, interview, 15 July 2001; Thay, personal correspondence, 26 October 2002.

<sup>73</sup> See Huynh Dinh Te, 'Interpersonal Relationships as Reflected in the Vietnamese Language', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1, 1, 1988, pp.45-7.

<sup>74</sup> See McLellan, pp.121-3.

good or evil, on their descendents.<sup>75</sup> Because the dead do not abandon their Vietnamese kin, it is important that the living continue to acknowledge and respect them.<sup>76</sup> As elders perform these rites towards their parents (and others), they present a model of filial piety that they hope their children will emulate. Significantly, these expectations are held by, and transmitted to, females in particular.<sup>77</sup>



FIG. 12: A Young Attendee Pays Homage to Her Ancestors. Giac Nhien temple, Otahuhu, 2002. Author's collection.

The kitchen and the shrine of the ancestors are women's spaces which invoke a generational hierarchy. Similar stratifications exist in other parts of the temple. In the Buddha hall, the 'public' superiority of men is evoked. Males sit together on the right-hand side of the room. The older men fill the front row, placing themselves nearest the lectern from which the abbot gives his sermons. Women, far more numerous, keep to the left, though this sometimes means they must be crammed up while the other side of the room is half-empty.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Hickey, p.99; Soucy, p.87.

<sup>76</sup> On the issue of dealing with loss and separation by holding memorial services, see McLellan, pp.122, 193-4.

<sup>77</sup> Thay, personal correspondence, 26 October 2002.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Ruth M. Krulfeld, 'Buddhism, Maintenance and Change: Reinterpreting Gender in a Lao Refugee Community', in Linda A. Camino and Ruth M. Krulfeld, *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning: Refugee Identity, Gender, and Culture Change*, pp.102-4.

In the dining area the format is much the same. The senior monk sits at the head of the right-hand table, followed by other monks, older men, then male youth. The two nuns sit at the head of the table closest to the kitchen, along with the other women. On important occasions, when attendance is high, older males will be seated in the formal dining area, with the best seats – carved and originating from Vietnam – reserved for the monks and nuns, the most senior laymen, and special female guests. If, in the main eating area, there are not enough chairs or stools available, women will stand around the kitchen bench eating their lunch, while men are given seats.<sup>79</sup>



FIG. 13: The Buddha Hall of Giac Nien Temple. Note the separate spaces for men and women, and the larger number of female devotees. Otahuhu, 2002. Author's collection.

This gendered order corresponds to the hierarchical system established in the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. The Cullayagga text, derived from rules created at the ordination of the first Buddhist nun, specifies that ‘a bhikkhuni [nun] of even a 100 years standing should rise, greet respectfully and bow down before a bhikkhu [monk] ordained even that day.’<sup>80</sup> Monks were to show deference to those ordained before them, laymen were in turn to show deference to monks and their lay seniors, nuns were to show deference to all men and senior nuns, and laywomen to show deference to all men, nuns, and senior laywomen.<sup>81</sup> The gendered hierarchy of the temple is also justified under Confucianism’s age and gender scheme. The ‘three submissions’ (*tam tong*)

<sup>79</sup> Fieldnotes, Giac Nien temple, Otahuhu, 4 August 2002.

<sup>80</sup> Bhikkhuni Kusuma, ‘Inaccuracies in Buddhist Women’s History’, in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed, *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, Richmond, Surrey, 2000, p.6.

<sup>81</sup> For a discussion of inequalities between monks and nuns in Vietnam, see McLellan, pp.116-7.

for women stipulate that girls must obey their fathers, women must obey their husbands, and widows must obey their eldest sons.<sup>82</sup> In pre-modern Vietnam this idealized order was expressed in sanctions that women were to walk behind their husbands, and children to sit at different tables from their parents.<sup>83</sup> Innumerable axioms and proverbs reiterated the same set of standards.<sup>84</sup>

Yet while the spirit of this hierarchy is respected within the temple, so too is convenience and informal ease; perhaps seen as part of a contra-Confucian tradition indigenous to the south of Vietnam.<sup>85</sup> At lunch the format described above is gradually undone as late arrivals find a place where they can (though men will keep to their 'own' table, and all laypeople will avoid the head monk's seat). And while at the commencement of the meal pride of place at the head of the two tables is always reserved for the monks and nuns (and there is some acumen attached to close proximity to them), there is not, as Jamieson has described of the traditional Vietnamese meeting-house feast, any hierarchical jostling.<sup>86</sup>

While the finer points of rank may be looser in the Otahuhu temple than they typically are in Vietnam, the preceding discussion shows how, nonetheless, the temple environment provides a clear map of idealized parent-child and gender relations. Within an immigrant culture dealing with poor communication between generations and loss of filial piety, the space of Giac Nhien temple invokes both respect and responsibility.<sup>87</sup> The regard and

<sup>82</sup> See McCoy pp.201-2; Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.161.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.33.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.83. Female subordination was questioned in pre-modern Vietnam, both in folk songs and in the poetry of, for example, Ho Xuan Huong, writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. (See My-Van Tran, 'Vietnamese Women Two Hundred Years of Progress', in Vietnamese Women's Association in NSW, Inc., 'First National Conference of Vietnamese Women in Australia (Conference Proceedings)', 1994, np.) Rural Vietnam, especially in the south, has been credited with more egalitarian 'Contra-Confucian' relations between husband and wife than existed in the more Chinese-influenced north of the country (Soucy, p.50). Woodside discusses Confucian-inspired royal ordinances invoking an age-over-youth hierarchy within each village which, he argues, suggest that 'there was a continuing tension between the ideal leadership of the elderly, which was justified by Confucian ideology, and the real leadership of the rich and powerful, who were not necessarily so old.' As in immigrant family relations, the key issue has often revolved around money and powers of communication: if elders were 'poor and illiterate, they were compelled to defer to younger gentry family members, who possessed enough literacy and managerial knowledge to keep the village records and to manage its communal resources.' (Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, Boston, 1976, pp.114-15.)

<sup>85</sup> Kibria, p.48-9; Soucy, pp.82-3.

<sup>86</sup> 'Seating arrangements and the distribution of portions at such feasts were prescribed down to the smallest detail in accord with relative position in the hierarchy.' (Jamieson, p.31.) See also John Kleinen, *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past: A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village*, Singapore, 1999, p.35.

<sup>87</sup> As McLellan's study of Toronto Asian Buddhist pagodas concluded, 'Buddhist institutions provide a forum through which traditional cultural forms of respect and recognition are maintained, for example, the sangha position of monk, [and] nun... Temple



deference accorded to Buddhist clergy and elders has been a means of putting 'into order' families whose dynamics have been reshuffled (by war, immigration and the influence of mainstream Auckland culture) to afford youth an unconventional degree of power and freedom. Much of this has to do with language ability and fluency with host-society norms. The young, possessing better English than their parents, interpret utility bills, mediate between the household and the English-speaking community, and often find jobs with salaries far beyond those of their working-class elders.<sup>88</sup>



FIG. 14: The Dining Area. Note the men's and women's separate tables. Several women are standing around the kitchen eating lunch. Giac Nhien temple, Otahuhu, 2002. Author's collection.

The temple is important and unusual as a public space in which the parents' Vietnamese identity can be utilised, and where their children can be encouraged, according to the Vietnamese dictum, to 'sit where your parents place you' (*Cha me dat dau ngoi day*).<sup>89</sup> As existing studies have noted, women's apparent subordination to men within this system, in practice empowers female attendees by providing them with a particularly strong network of friends, and by accentuating the idea that, like their mothers, children need to give respect where it is due.<sup>90</sup>

For some adults and young people (those who attend most often) the temple and Christian churches have become a comfort zone. But, not surprisingly, for others they can be unsettling environments, a reminder of a double 'identity', or of outsider status. This may be the case for those from communist families, for Vietnamese who married European-New Zealanders, and for young Vietnamese who, feeling neither entirely 'Vietnamese' nor completely 'Kiwi', lack confidence in who they are.

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activities also support traditional forms of respect within the family structure and within the community.' (McLellan, p.193.)

<sup>88</sup> Kibria, pp.132, 149, 151; Nancy Viviani, *The Indochinese in Australia 1975-1995: From Burnt Boats to Barbecues*, Melbourne, 1996, p.129.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.76.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, pp.171-3; Kibria, pp.9, 20, 109, 125, 128-30, 133-6.



Ba Duyen, the 19-year-old who wished to keep in touch with her ‘roots’, was one of the young interviewees with mixed feelings about Vietnamese religious groups. She was afraid of getting a bad reputation among the Catholic Vietnamese congregation because her values were different from those of her parents’ generation:

BA DUYEN: Vietnamese people expect differently, and it’s scary.

Q: In what ways?

BA DUYEN: Because, like, there’s a community here, and I’m afraid of getting a bad reputation. So, it’s scary. When I talk to them I have to be careful what I say. They always take- ’cause they take things differently from me.<sup>91</sup>



FIG. 15: Thay Delivers a Sermon. Giac Nhien temple, Otahuhu, 2002. Author’s collection.

For Ba Duyen, the Confucian standards important to elders had become a hang up, and the social network that sustained them made her anxious. She felt targeted: ‘I don’t want to be in the community. I mean, I can come in sometimes, but not totally in it. Because I don’t like the gossip circle, and I don’t want to be noticed.’<sup>92</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Ba Duyen, interview, 23 August 2001.

<sup>92</sup> Ba Duyen, interview, 23 August 2001.

## Conclusion

Mandy Thomas has written that, for Australian-Vietnamese, ‘the home alone becomes emblematic of empowerment and assists people in dealing with the sense of loss that has accompanied leaving their homeland, families and homes behind.’<sup>93</sup> This article challenges that claim. Like the household spaces which Thomas describes, Buddhist temples such as Giac Nhien in Otahuhu, aim to create an autonomous ‘Vietnamese’ zone, a kind of extra-territorial space in which the rules of the host society are pushed to the margins in favour of a selection of traditional forms. This extra-territoriality was deeply attractive to interviewees who experienced a feeling of isolation in the resettlement environment.<sup>94</sup> The temple has been a place to recreate some of the conditions they most fondly remembered of the homeland: to establish a public social space that operates on ‘our terms’ – the terms of pro-Southern, adult Vietnamese. It has been a means of fostering within the immigrant life an aspect that is ‘exclusively Vietnamese’.<sup>95</sup>

The attraction of such an environment varies from individual to individual, but is certainly most popular among those, especially middle-aged women and the elderly, who spent their formative years in Vietnam and have not integrated into the host society.<sup>96</sup> These people have experienced not just loneliness in New Zealand, but a sense of disempowerment. The temple is a place where they can speak their language, understand the customs, become authorities on proper conduct if they wish. Space is once more familiar, decodable.<sup>97</sup>

For their children, feelings towards Giac Nhien have been mixed. The temple can stand as an uncomfortable reminder of the culture gulf between generations. Some New Zealand-raised Vietnamese reject the religious observances of their parents, the pressure to conform within a Confucian hierarchy, and the sangha’s critical stance towards certain Western cultural freedoms. Other young people willingly attend the temple, attracted by opportunities to get in touch with Vietnamese ‘roots’, and to spend time with friends who know what it means to negotiate commitments to two cultures.

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<sup>93</sup> Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.47. Emphasis added.

<sup>94</sup> The term ‘extra-territoriality’ has been used in other migration studies. See Stanford M. Lyman, *Chinese Americans*, New York, 1974, pp.6-7; and Emmanuel Ma Mung, ‘Groundlessness and Utopia: The Chinese Diaspora and Territory’, in Elizabeth Sinn, *The Last Half Century of Chinese Overseas*, Hong Kong, 1998, pp.39-40.

<sup>95</sup> McLellan, p.129. See also Dorais, ‘Religion and Refugee Adaptation’, p.22.

<sup>96</sup> In Trung Tran’s survey of Auckland Vietnamese only 33% of respondents were found to be fluent in English. (Trung Tran, ‘Deconstructing the ‘asian’ Other: A Case Study of the Vietnamese Community in Auckland’, MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1997, p.131.) Beiser found that more than half of elderly Vietnamese spoke no English after ten years in Canada. (Morton Beiser, *Strangers at the Gate: The ‘Boat People’s’ First Ten Years in Canada*, Toronto, 1999, p.151.)

<sup>97</sup> See Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, p.46.