

## The Vietnamese in Thailand who returned to their Homeland\*

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Though the issue on the overseas Vietnamese or Viet kieu in Thailand, is mentioned from time to time, research work on this topic is sporadic. Most of the studies on the Vietnamese in Thailand focus on those who arrived in Thailand before the end of the World War II, known as Old Vietnamese or Viet cu, whereas there are very few studies on the Vietnamese who came to Thailand after the end of the World War II. Most of them are the compiling of documents, or research undertaken by Thai authorities working in government agencies. These works focus on politics and are full of suspicion of the Vietnamese who were believed to participate in the resistance in the Vietnam War, including their cooperation with the Thai Communist movement which might affect the stability of the Thai government. Consequently and not surprisingly, the topic of “Viet kieu hoi huong” or the Vietnamese in Thailand who returned to Vietnam during 1960-1964<sup>1</sup> seems to receive no attention, or to be more exact, it is not aware of.

This paper will briefly mention the arrival of the Vietnamese in Thailand by focusing on the period after the WW II. These Vietnamese immigrants are called by the Ministry of Interior “Yuon Oppayop”. They are also called Viet moi or Yuon mai (New Vietnamese) in Thai, or sometimes “Viet kieu” which means the Vietnamese who live outside Vietnam. Then, we will discuss their repatriation to Vietnam during 1960-1964 and take a look at the reasons why they decided to go back. Finally, we will look at their life when they arrived in Vietnam, how they were viewed and treated by the Vietnamese Party of Vietnam (CPV), and how difficulties in adapting themselves, socially, economically and politically, into the new environment. And also exploring their social and economic status in Vietnam now.

Furthermore, we will see whether or not the Viet kieu enjoy equal rights as their countrymen, such as rights in education, occupation, and how they contribute to economic and social development of the country. After settling down in Vietnam, we explore whether they maintain and preserve Thai culture; and whether they have regular gatherings among themselves. The next question is how they

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 1959 Agreement between the Thai Red Cross Society and the Red Cross Society of Democratic Republic of Vietnam Concerning the Repatriation of Vietnamese in Thailand to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

contact with their family and friends who still live in Thailand. And lastly, how do they identify themselves, as Vietnamese or Thai.

### **The exodus of Vietnamese into Thailand in 1946**

It is found that Vietnamese people migrated into Thailand (or Siam) since Ayutthaya period in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. Other migration took place in King Taksin period, the early Rattanakosin period (the reigns of King Rama I, II and III during the late 18<sup>th</sup>- mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), the reign of King Rama IV in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the reign of King Rama V from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the period during and after World War II. They came both by land<sup>2</sup> and sea. The exodus was motivated by various factors – religious persecution, French suppression, as well as hardship and suffering from poverty. During the war time, the Vietnamese were forced to move from Cambodia to Thailand or Siam as prisoners of war, such as during the war between Vietnam and Siam which took place in Cambodia during 1832-1846. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Vietnamese nationalists moved to Isan, present-day northeastern Thailand, and used this area as a base for their resistance against the French in Laos and Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Some had to leave the country during Soviet - Nhe Tinh Revolution, which occurred in 1930, due to the French oppression.

This paper focuses on those who migrated into Thailand during 1945-1946. They tried to flee severe suppression by the French armed forces in March 1946 from Lao provinces along the Mekong River. The biggest wave or exodus of Vietnamese migrants or refugees was approximated at 30,000 to 50,000. They moved to Thailand on 21 March 1946 from Tha Khek, Kham Muon Province in Laos to Nakhon Phanom. The event was referred to as “Tha Khek Incident”<sup>4</sup> by the Vietnamese and Lao people. Other smaller waves took place in Tha Bo, Nong Khai, and Mukdahan. Humanitarian assistance such as dwellings, food, medicines, land, and jobs, were provided to these Vietnamese by Pridi Banomyong, the Thai Prime Minister at the time.<sup>5</sup> Though life was not easy, these Vietnamese were free to live and move from one place to another during Pridi’s period. Moreover, Thai government granted loans about 1 million baht to those who needed.

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<sup>2</sup> See, Thanyathip Sripana, “The East- West Corridor in historical perspective” (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 26 March 2003, p.7.

<sup>3</sup> See detail in, Christopher E Gosha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of The Vietnamese Revolution (1885-1954)*, Curzon Press, London, 1999 ; and David G Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, University of California, Los Angeles, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding this incident, see, Supot Dantrakoon, *General Singapo and the Revolution in Lao History and American Bases in Thailand* (in Thai), Institute of Social Science (Thailand). (no publication date), pp.66-81; Sisana Sisan, *Prince Suphanouwon the Revolutionary Leader* (in Lao), the Committee of Social Science of the People’s Republic of Democratic Laos, Vientiane, 1989, pp.24-25.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding Pridi government’s foreign policy, see Pridi Banomyong, *Political and military tasks of the Free-Thai movement to regain national sovereignty and independence*, Committee on the Project for the National Celebration on the Occasion of the Centennial Anniversary of Pridi Banomyong, Senior Statesman, Bangkok, 2001 ; Charivat Santapura, *Thai Foreign Policy 1932-1946*, Committee on the Project for the National Celebration on the Occasion of the Centennial Anniversary of Pridi Banomyong, Senior Statesman (private sector), Raunkaew Printing House, Bangkok, 2000.

These people scattered in many provinces, including Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan (at that time was a district in Nakhon Phanom), Sakon Nakhon, Udorn Thani, Nong Khai, Khon Kaen, Roi-ed, Kalasin, Nakhon Rachasima (Korat), Ubonratchathani, etc.

The Ministry of the Interior of Thailand called these people “Yuon Oppayop” which means “Vietnamese refugees”. However, the word “refugees” does not have the sense of “refugees” used in the Convention relating to the Status of the Refugees, signed in Geneva on 28 July 1951.

“Yuon Oppayop” can be also called “Yuon Mai” in Thai, and “Viet Moi” in Vietnamese which can be translated “new Vietnamese”. On the contrary, “Yuon Kao” or “Viet Cu” which means “old Vietnamese” includes those who arrived in Thailand before the end of the WW II. In this paper, we sometimes call Vietnamese who live in Thailand “Viet kieu” which means overseas Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese who returned to Vietnam during 1960-1964 “Viet kieu hoi huong” which means overseas Vietnamese who returned to their homeland.

### **The Vietnamese in Thailand<sup>6</sup> or “Viet kieu” or “Yuon Oppayop” under Thai government during late 1940’s to early 1960’s**

Their life totally changed with the end of Pridi’s government. Under of Phiboon Songkram, Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikhajorn, the Vietnamese in Thailand especially in Isan region encountered many hardship, starting in 1949 when the Communist came to power in China. Phiboon government suspected that these Vietnamese in Isan would take advantage situation and propagate Communism to Thai society. This would finally allow China and North Vietnamese to penetrate Thailand<sup>7</sup> or the Communist influence would spread to Bangkok.<sup>8</sup>

This led to the reexamination of Thai attitude and policy towards the Vietnamese, especially Viet moi, including a policy shift and a tighter control on them. This could be seen in a Memorandum No. 1151/1949 submitted by Phya Ram Rajapakdi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior, to the Minister of the same ministry on April 7, 1949, saying that the new regulations were completed and

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding the Vietnamese in Thailand and Isan, see, Thanyathip Sripana, “The Vietnamese in Isan”, *Indochina Studies Journal*, Indochina Studies Center, January 2002-December 2003, pp. 59-75 ; Thanyathip Sripana, “When will they become Thai people?” (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 9 May 2003, p.7 ; Thanyathip Sripana, “From Sea Games in Vietnam to Vietnamese refugees” (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 5 December 2003, p.7 ; Thanyathip Sripana, “Ban Na Chok, A Remembrance of Friendship of Ho Chi Minh in Siam” (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 23 February 2004, p.7; Thanyathip Sripana, “PM Thaksin’s promise at Friendship Village in Ban Na Chok” (in Thai), *Matichon Daily*, 23 March 2004, p.7. Thanyathip Sripana. “Cong dong nguoi Viet Nam o Dong Bac Thai Lan”, *Tap chi Nghien cuu Dong Nam A*, so 4, nam 2004, trang 68 – 73 ; Thanyathip Sripana. “Bao gio moi duoc nhap quoc tich Thai Lan”, *Tap chi Nghien cuu Dong Nam A*, so 4, nam 2003, trang 80 - 84.

<sup>7</sup> Chan Ansuchote, “II. Changing response of Thai authority”, *The Vietnamese Refugees in Thailand: A Case Study in Decision-Making*, M.A. Thesis, Thammasat University, 1960, p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Peter A. Poole, “Chapter IV The Vietnamese refugee problem in Thai foreign relations, 1945-1957”, *The Vietnamese in Thailand: A Historical perspective*, Cornell University Press, USA, 1970, p.46.

submitted to the Minister of Interior.<sup>9</sup> The new regulations were approved by the Minister of Interior and requested final approval from the Prime Minister Marshall Phiboon Songkram who ordered in a Memorandum that restricted areas were required for the Vietnamese refugees in some provinces.<sup>10</sup>

On April 18, 1949, order No. 154/1949 was issued by the Ministry of Interior to officials in the provinces inhibited by Vietnamese. It orders to move the Vietnamese to 13 provinces, such as Chiengrai, Nan, Uttaradit, Luey, Ubol Rachathani, Nongkhai, Nakhon Phanom, Buriram, Srisaket, Surin, Prachinburi, Chanthaburi and Trad. In 1950, tighter control was applied to the Vietnamese to move in 5 provinces of Nong Khai, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, and Prachinburi. This aimed that movement and activities of the Vietnamese would be under strict control. In 1951, “Registration Center of Yuon Oppayop” (የኢትዮጵያ የቃርቃሪያ ደንብ) or “Office of Yuon Oppayop” (የኢትዮጵያ የቃርቃሪያ ደንብ) was set up under the Police Department. It was designed as a control office or center of the Vietnamese. It was also designed to collect information, files report, drafting rules and regulations related to the Vietnamese, as well as to follow on their movement and activities.

When the conflict in Indochina was intensified in 1953, as well as the Vietnamese activities, the Thai government ordered the evacuation of 720 Vietnamese in Isan and sent them to Phatthalung on May 22 and June 2, 1953.<sup>11</sup> and another 126 to Surat Thani on June 22, 1953. After that, some were arrested during the 1950's and 1960's. Thai government made a decision in July 1953 to explore possibility of repatriating these people,<sup>12</sup> and to force some Vietnamese to South Vietnam. During this period, some were forced to do so.

Being the victims of the anti-communist policy and under the suspicion of Thai governments since the end of the 1940's, the Vietnamese (Viet moi in particular) lived under pressure and encountered hardships and had no rights to education while living within restricted areas. Moreover, being under strict surveillance of Thai authorities, some Viet moi were affected by psychological stress.

This hardship continued until the end of 1980's or the beginning of 1990's when the Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations were normalized,<sup>13</sup> and Thai government commenced to solve problems on the Vietnamese by granting Thai nationality to the second and third generation, and alien status to the first generation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Op.cit., Chan Ansuchote, pp.13-14.

<sup>10</sup> Memorandum sent by Prime Minister Phibul Songkram to the Minister of Interior on April 9, 1949, *ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding Thai-Vietnamese relationship, see, Thanyathip Sripana, “25 Years of Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations”, *Journal of Asian* Review, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, September-December 2001, pp. 17-32 ; Thanyathip Sripana. “25 nam thiet lop quan he ngoai giao Thai lan-Viet nam”, *Tap chi Nghien Cuu Dong Nam A*, So 6(51), Vien Nghien Cuu Dong Nam A, Trung Tam Khao Hoc Xa Hoi va Nhan Van Quoc Gia, Hanoi.

<sup>14</sup> The Vietnamese refugees or Yuan Oppayop of the first generation means those who crossed Mekong river from the end of the WW II, so born outside Thai territory. The second generation means the children of the first generation, and were born on Thai territory. The third generation

## The repatriation of the Vietnamese to the North Vietnam

The 1959 Agreement between the Thai Red Cross Society and the Red Cross Society of Democratic Republic of Vietnam Concerning the Repatriation of Vietnamese in Thailand to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had brought the Vietnamese or Viet kieu back to their homeland. 70,032 had registered for repatriation, but only 46,256 had been able to return during 1960-1964 while another 23,776 were left in Thailand in 1964<sup>15</sup> due to the American bombing on Tonkin Gulf which stopped the repatriation procedure. However, according to population census of the Vietnamese made by the Thai Ministry of Interior in 1965, 31,818 were found in 8 provinces of Thailand, such as Nongkhai, Udorn Thani, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon Rachathani, Prachinburi, Surat Thani, and Pathalung. It means that apart from newly born children, many Vietnamese were not on the registration list for repatriation, and that they may live outside these 8 provinces. And the real figure of the Vietnamese in Thailand in 1965 may exceed 31,818.

Factors leading to a decision to return to Vietnam during 1960-1964 are :

- the intention to contribute to economic development of Vietnam due to the persuasion of the Vietnamese government ;
- the fear of being sent to South Vietnam by Thai military government of Sarit as many of them came from the North, and regarded North Vietnam as their homeland ;
- the hardship due to all kinds of strict rules and control laid by Thai government depriving them from their rights and freedom, especially the right to work and gain an education. Many Vietnamese remained in Thailand and those who returned to Vietnam revealed that strict rules and measures were deliberately exercised in order to push them to go back to Vietnam as the Thai government were fearful that they were helping the Viet Minh sabotage and destabilize Thai national security. We have to note that in the 1950's these Vietnamese in Thailand still regarded their stay in Thailand as temporary.<sup>16</sup> They hoped to go back to Vietnam very soon.

The factors relating to the decision not to return during 1960-1964 are mostly personal reasons, relating to health or being financially well established in Thailand.<sup>17</sup> In addition, they were afraid of unexpected hardship in Vietnam.

Peter A. Poole, in *The Vietnamese in Thailand*, reported that most of the Viet kieu hoped to remain in Thailand<sup>18</sup>, but this was published in 1970. However,

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means the children of the second generation and the grand-children of the first generation, certainly were born on Thai territory as well.

<sup>15</sup> Vichan Champeesri and Suthawit Suphan, "Chapter 4 Repatriation to the North Vietnam", *Vietnamese Refugees and the National Security* (in Thai), Odeon Store, Bangkok, 1976, pp. 89, 109-110.

<sup>16</sup> Information from interview during 2003-2005 of the Viet kieu in Thailand and those who returned back to Vietnam and are now living there. In this research work, we had interviewed not less than 150 Viet kieu in both countries.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

during our research of 2003-2005, most of the informants, even those who were not involved in political activities, said that most of the Viet kieu hoped to leave for North Vietnam. Is it possible that during the 1960's while Poole was conducting research on the Vietnamese in Thailand, the Viet kieu who wanted to return to Vietnam dared not to tell the truth that they wanted to return to the north for fear that Thai authorities would learn about their attitude towards the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam). Poole may have just interrogated only those who hoped to remain in Thailand, whereas our research may have been biased towards those who hoped to return to the North of Vietnam. To gain an accurate idea of what people were thinking, no matter what their decision was probably very difficult at the time.

The Vietnamese who returned to Vietnam under the repatriation programme are first and second generation Viet moi. Those of the third generation were not yet born at that time. Some Viet moi are now Thai nationals, while some Viet cu who had already got Thai nationality, also participated in the programme. During research fieldwork in Vietnam, the author had met some of those who had been in the nationalist movement.

The priority for the first shipment of repatriation was reserved for the Vietnamese who had been arrested and detained as pro-Communist. They were released from jail before the end of October 1959 in order that they might be repatriated with their families in the first shipment.<sup>19</sup> These Vietnamese were viewed by the CPV as patriotic, which is one reason Ho Chi Minh himself welcomed them at the port of Hai Phong.

### **How the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) considered the “Viet kieu hoi huong” ?**

The presence of Ho Chi Minh at the port of Hai Phong to receive these Vietnamese can show the significance and importance of Viet kieu hoi huong in the eyes of the CPV and Ho Chi Minh himself. In fact the Vietnamese or Viet kieu who live in Thailand have been considered as the people who sacrificed themselves for the country. In the past, more specifically from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Viet kieu in Thailand participated in the anti-French movement fighting for independence of Vietnam on Thai territory. They became a good rear base in the west of Vietnam. From 1946, when the French returned to Indochina after Japanese defeat in the WWII, the anti-French movement in Thailand became active again. In 1946 and 1947, some Viet kieu in Isan received artillery from the Pridi Banomyong government to protect the Mekong River bank on the Thai side. Thai soil, especially Isan, had become the relay or refuge for the Viet kieu who had fought in Laos and Vietnam. They came to “recharge” in order to leave for the battle field again. For these reasons, Viet kieu or Vietnamese in Thailand, when they returned to Vietnam were recognized by the Party as people who sacrificed themselves for their country. Thus, it was not surprising that the first repatriation of

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<sup>18</sup> Op.cit., Peter A. Poole, “Chapter 8 North Vietnam and Refugees”, *The Vietnamese in Thailand*, p.95.

<sup>19</sup> Op.cit., Chan Ansuchote, p.10 ; and also according to the interview of some Viet kieu living in Thailand and Viet kieu hoi huong who live in Vietnam

the “patriotic ones” to Hai Phong on January 10, 1960, was greeted by Ho Chi Minh<sup>20</sup> who was in Siam, or Thailand, during 1928-1929 and again in 1930.

At the port, Ho Chi Minh gave a speech welcoming these Viet kieu hoi huong. He also thanked Thai people for helping them and the Thai government for strictly following the agreement. He thanked the International Red Cross and the Thai Red Cross for bringing these Viet kieu hoi huong to Vietnam safely. He also expressed his appreciation to the captain of the ship “Anh Phuc” and crews for taking care of all Viet kieu along the trip.

When the Viet kieu arrived in Hai Phong, they stayed for 7-10 days in the buildings on Dinh Tien Hoang Street, Quang Trung Street and on a street in front of the railway station.<sup>21</sup> After that, they could choose where they wanted to live, usually the province of their parents. For those who didn’t have family or relatives, the government would arrange housing for them. Some lived in Hai Phong, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Thai Nguyen, Ha Tay, Thanh Hoa, Hanoi, and other provinces along the Red River and Thai Binh River, and some to Nghe Tinh province in the central region. Some were willing to move to remote and deserted areas in order to develop those areas in accordance to the policy of New Economic Zone Development in the Five-Year Plan (1961-1965), namely, Hoa Binh, Yen Bai, Tuyen Quang, and Ha Giang.<sup>22</sup> In Hoa Binh, a number of the Vietnamese from Thailand regrouped and formed a village called *Lang Thai* which means Thai village or *Pho Thai* which means Thai street. This Thai village is located in Tan Lap, Trung Minh sub-district, Ky Son district.<sup>23</sup>

### **Life of “Viet kieu hoi huong” in Vietnam**

Today they have equal rights and access to education and work. They are treated like other Vietnamese in the country. They were not treated differently as they were in Thailand. Later on, some of them occupied high position in the state bureau, such as Director-General, Judge of the People’s Court at provincial level, etc.

### **The difficulties in adapting themselves into the new environment**

In the early 1960’s North Vietnam faced severe economic problems. It was not ready to receive all of these Viet kieu from Thailand, but there were reasons why they had to take them in. First, receiving Vietnamese from Thailand would provide a good image for the Republic of Vietnam or South Vietnam, and meant a loss of face for Saigon.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, the Socialist Vietnamese government had sympathy with the Vietnamese in Thailand who had to live under strict regulations and much pressure for many years. The Viet kieu were under the fear that they would

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<sup>20</sup> The picture of Ho Chi Minh’s greeting of the first trip on January 10, 1960 at the port of Hai Phong was found at the Museum of Hai Phong. The author visited this place in June 2004.

<sup>21</sup> The author visited this place in June 2003.

<sup>22</sup> *Bao cao cua Hoi than nhan nguoi Vietnam o cac nuoc ASEAN*, Chi hoi Lao -Thai Hoi Huong 1960-2000, nhan dip ky niem 40 nam, Trung tam hoi nghi quoi te, 01-2000, p.5.

<sup>23</sup> Most of Viet kieu at “Lang Thai” in Hoa Binh province are from Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon and Mukdahan.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., Peter A. Poole, “Chapter 8 North Vietnam and Refugees”, *The Vietnamese in Thailand*, p.95.

be sent to South Vietnam by the Thai military government against their will. A number of Vietnamese interviewed in Thailand, and those who returned to Vietnam, said that they preferred to die in Thailand to being sent to South Vietnam.<sup>25</sup>

Due to economic hardships during the first years the Vietnamese who returned to Vietnam had difficulties in adapting themselves, economically and culturally. Life was more difficult than they had expected before leaving Thailand. The environment in North Vietnam was absolutely different from Thailand. Food distribution was under ration system and there was a serious shortage of consumer goods and medicine.

Culturally, these Viet kieu hoi huong had a Thai-Isan life style which is different from the Vietnamese one, including the way they dressed. While the local Vietnamese wear the long and wide-leg pants, Viet kieu hoi huong (women) wear “Pa-sin” or pants but the style is different from the Vietnamese ones. Interviewees report that the Viet kieu hoi huong looked more modern than the Vietnamese of the country. And they were considered by local people, at that time, as the people from the capitalist country. At the beginning, these two groups of Vietnamese while still not accustomed to each other, felt alienated to each other.

While Viet kieu hoi huong were considered capitalist, the local Vietnamese were considered backward. Viet kieu hoi huong called themselves “Keo lan” which means Vietnamese from Thailand, and called another “Keo khoc”<sup>26</sup> which means Vietnamese who originally lived there. “Khoc” ( ก ), a Thai word, means original land. This word implies backwardness.

This feeling of alienation among the two groups disappeared gradually as distrust towards capitalist types subsided and the Viet kieu hoi huong were able to integrate into society. At present, there is no longer discrimination against Viet kieu hoi huong, and vice versa. This only occurred when Viet kieu had just arrived in Vietnam from Thailand. However, the words “keo lan” and “keo khoc” are still heard.

Regarding the attitude of Vietnamese authorities towards Viet kieu hoi huong, the interviews suggest that in the early years after their arrival there was a great deal of suspicion from local authorities. When the authorities got to know them; however, there suspicions of the capitalist types subsided. Furthermore, the Viet kieu abided by the laws and never gave any cause for concern.

### **How could the Viet kieu hoi huong communicate with their family and relatives in Thailand after they returned back to Vietnam**

During 1960-1964 when the war with the US had not yet escalated, it was not too difficult to contact family and relatives in Thailand because there were ships going back to Bangkok and letters could be sent via ship. Other letters could be

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<sup>25</sup> From the interviews of the Viet kieu in Thailand such as in Udon Thani, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Mukdahan, Thailand in 2003-2005; and those of Viet kieu hoi huong in Vietnam such as in Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Hai Phong in June 2004.

<sup>26</sup> According the interviews of the Viet kieu hoi huong in many provinces in Vietnam in 2003-2005.

sent by post via Hong Kong, and thus they were keen to keep in touch and hear news from Thailand. Quite a few Viet kieu hoi huong had left their parents in Thailand. Some informants said that the incoming and outgoing letters were usually under surveillance of the Vietnamese authorities and in Thailand letters were checked as well. It appears that the Vietnamese authorities did not want the outside world to know about the political and economic situation in Vietnam, while the Thai authorities were afraid that the Viet Minh would use this means of communication for their intelligence work.

From 1964, when the repatriation was suspended due to the Tonkin Gulf Incident, the communication among the Viet kieu in Vietnam and Thailand, especially with mail via Hong Kong became difficult and finally impossible. From that time on, the communication of the Viet kieu in both countries was totally suspended, and they were not to see each other. They had to wait until the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's when Thailand and Vietnam succeeded in normalizing diplomatic relations. Many of them were delighted to be able to meet again at this time. Returning to Thailand reminds the Viet kieu from Vietnam of their old time there. They could visit their parent's cemetery. Some Viet kieu's parents had passed away when they were in Vietnam, so there were unable to be by their parent's side when they died.

### **Viet kieu's contribution to economic and social development of Vietnam**

The Viet kieu returned to Vietnam during 1960-1964 with equipment for agriculture, knowledge of construction, sewing machines, etc. They tried to develop their skills in carpentry, masonry, metallurgy, photography, etc, and brought the skills from Thailand to Vietnam. When arriving in Vietnam some of them had worked in state enterprises or cooperatives in the textile, iron and steel industry, or dress-making. They even participated in opening hairdressing shops in the form of cooperatives in Hai Phong, Thanh Hoa, Hanoi, etc. Some of them were involved in state bureau and enterprises. Some decided to join the army to fight against the American.

Later on, some became teachers and lecturers in schools and universities. Some became researchers in social sciences or Thai language teachers. Some became the officials of Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of External Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Some worked in the Vietnamese Embassy in Thailand. From the beginning of 1990's, some became tourist guides, coordinated trade or business, and interpreter. Some have worked as interpreters, even before the 1990's.

From the beginning of the 1960's until now many Viet kieu have become announcers on Radio Vietnam - in Thai, Lao, and Cambodian sections.

### **How do they identify themselves - Vietnamese or Thai?**

If Viet kieu in Thailand did not love their homeland, they would have not returned back to Vietnam. The characteristics of Viet kieu from Thailand is obviously different from those who were in other countries. They are even different

from the Vietnamese in Vietnam, in a sense that they show a strong feeling of patriotism, sometimes stronger than those who live in Vietnam. This is due to the fact that they live far from their country, under political pressure, and facing all aspects of hardship in Thailand. The fact they were under pressure, faced with the hardship in Thailand, and not considered by Thai government as Thai citizens, they felt no dignity, and in spite of their attachment to Thailand, they wanted to return and live in Vietnam.

A number of Viet kieu from Thailand were interviewed in Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Hai Phong, Hoa Binh, Ho Chi Minh City (this is not representative of all Viet kieu in Vietnam) identified themselves as Vietnamese. However, they admitted that they still had strong attachment to Thailand and have preserved Thai culture, and that a part of them is Thai. The level of feeling to be Thai is different in each person, and difficult to measure.

### **The attachment to Thailand of the Viet kieu hoi huong**

They may feel that they are Vietnamese but their attachment to Thailand can be confirmed in various ways.

#### **The construction of “Hoi huong” Memorial**

Even before returning to Vietnam, the Viet kieu in Isan expressed their attachment and gratitude towards Thailand by constructing a memorial in each of Thailand's northern province where they had been living. Memorials can be found in the form of the clock tower in Nakhon Phanom erected in 1960, or the temple gates in many provinces, such as in Sakon Nakhon, Mukdahan, Khon Kaen, Nong Khai, and others.

#### **The sense of having two mothers, Vietnam and Thailand :**

Viet kieu from Thailand, like the Viet kieu or Vietnamese in Thailand, feel that they have a sense of belonging to both Vietnam and Thailand as their two mothers.<sup>27</sup> Vietnam is the mother who gave birth to them and is considered as their root, whereas Thailand is the mother who has raised them after they fled the French suppression from Laos.

In numerous interviews with the Viet kieu hoi huong in Vietnam from 2003 to 2005, it was often repeated that they always wish to visit Thailand, especially Isan, to see their family and relatives, and to pay respect to their parents' cemeteries. Because of the cemeteries, their attachment can not be cut off from Thailand. The memories of happiness and suffering of their life in Isan in the past still remains in their mind.

However, they don't want to live or to spend the rest of their life in Thailand because they have already settled down, and have their extended family in Vietnam. Moreover, they feel they belong entirely to Vietnam. Like the Viet kieu in

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<sup>27</sup> According to the interviews with Vietnamese in Isan on many occasions in 2003-2005.

Thailand who also wish to visit Vietnam, and don't want to live or to spend the rest of their life in Vietnam for the same reasons.

### **The preservation of Thai culture among the Viet kieu hoi huong :**

While the Vietnamese in Thailand have tried to preserve the Vietnamese tradition and culture among themselves<sup>28</sup>, which represents a form of their attachment to Vietnam, Viet kieu hoi huong in Vietnam have tried to preserve Thai tradition and culture, as well. The preservation of Thai culture could be seen in Thai language preservation, meetings among them, preservation of aspects of tradition and culture.

Speaking Thai language is the most obvious and concrete way of preserving the culture. Most of the Viet kieu hoi huong speak fluent Thai, some using the Isan dialect, others use central Thai. Most of the Viet kieu the author met could speak Thai with correct pronunciation. They differentiate clearly between “” (if we could compare with ‘L’), and “” (if we could compare with ‘R’) while many Thai people, even in Bangkok, do not. Moreover, sometimes they speak Vietnamese with some Thai-Isan words, which is the same as the Viet kieu in Isan.

The meetings among Viet kieu hoi huong in Vietnam could show both their attachment to Thailand and preservation of Thai culture. They organize meetings on various occasions : New Year celebration (western), meetings among Viet kieu in each province, meetings among Viet kieu who used to live in each province in Isan, meetings in the occasion of Ho Chi Minh’s birthday, etc.

The preservation of Thai culture could be seen, in particular from their dresses, which were usually made from Isan cotton or silk, wearing a skirt is not Vietnamese style at all, specially skirt in Isan cotton. Some Viet kieu women wear “pa-sin”, a long type skirt that Thai women use, at home, the same as when they were in Isan. The preservation of Thai culture could also be seen from the garland laces and amulet hung around their necks<sup>29</sup>, and the loincloths tied around their waists.

On these occasions they also play Thai drums, perform Thai dances “ram wong” (ລົງ ອົງ), and sing Thai popular country songs ( ບັນຍາ ດົກລົງ ໂພນ ) of the 1950’s-1960’s period. They like Thai singers - Pongsri Voranuch, Somyoth Tassanaphan, Chlin Nandanakhorn, and Sawalee Pkaphan are their favorites. At present, Viet kieu hoi huong can get access to modern music and singers of the period from the 1990’s, thanks to normal relations between Thailand and Vietnam.

The politeness and friendliness expresses Thai manners and culture. This can also be found in these Viet kieu hoi huong. Besides, serving Isan food, and eating sticky rice with fingers, which are not familiar practices in the Vietnamese

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<sup>28</sup> Thanyathip Sripana, “The Vietnamese in Thailand : A cultural bridge in Thai-Vietnamese relationship”, *Journal of Science*, Social Sciences & Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, No 3E, 2004, pp.57-58.

<sup>29</sup> According to the author’s participation and observation in New Year party in January 2003, and in annual meeting party in May 2003 in Nam Dinh, as well as in other occasion in Hai Phong and Hoa Binh in Vietnam in 2003 and 2004

culture of “Kinh” people,<sup>30</sup> they still follow many Thai-Isan food traditions. These Isan food are such as “tam-som”<sup>31</sup> or papaya salad in Isan style, “laab” or minced pork or beef mixed with herbes and grinded rice. For dessert, “che thai” in Vietnamese or “lod chong” ( ໜີ້ຫຼັກ • ໄກ in Thai is very popular among Viet kieu hoi huong both in the north and in the south of Vietnam like Ho Chi Minh City. This kind of “che thai” was also sold in many places on street in Hai Phong.<sup>32</sup> Another dish the author has found in the south is Mee-ka-ti ( ເມື່ອ້າກ້າຕີ ໜີ້ຫຼັກ , white fine noodles with coconut milk topped on the noodles. It’s also cooked in Isan style.

All of these mentioned above could represents more or less Viet kieu hoi huong’s attachment to Thai culture till the present. However, the attachment and traditions will gradually fade as Viet kieu pass away. Their children and grandchildren would not inherit Thai culture as they have never lived within it, and they have grown up in a Vietnamese culture.

Viet kieu hoi huong at present have totally integrated into Vietnamese society. They have contributed to Vietnam’s economic development, education, and also relations between Thailand and Vietnam, especially at the people-to-people level.

The Viet kieu hoi huong became people of two cultures and homelands. Poems and memoirs written by them have expressed their nostalgia for Thailand, Isan, and the Mekong river. An old Viet kieu soldier who used to live in Thailand, fight against the French in Laos in the mid 1950’s and against the American in the southern part of Vietnam in the early 1970’s respectively, wrote a memoir :

*“ When the war is over, everybody went home.  
But where is my home?  
My home is on Mekong bank... ”*

Not only the writer himself feels nostalgia for Isan, but also the Viet kieu who read the memoir to me, also sobbed with grief and reminiscence of Mekong river in Isan.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> From the observations in meeting with these people on many occasions in Hoa Binh, Nam Dinh, Hai Phong, and Hanoi in 2003- 2004.

<sup>31</sup> The way that papaya salad is called in Isan dialect, is tam-som or tam-mak-hung. But in Bangkok it is called som-tam.

<sup>32</sup> According to observation of the author during fieldwork in this province during 2003-2004.

<sup>33</sup> During the visit I paid at his residence in Hanoi in May 2005.