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The Research Landscape of Current Vietnamese Skilled Migration

Chi Hong Nguyen
FPT University, chinh6@fe.edu.vn

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Introduction

Since 1975, the outward mobilities of Vietnamese people have become more pronounced in scale and intensity due to social, political, and economic changes in Vietnam. Such a transnational movement of people has enabled migration research to investigate the motivations and effects of international migration on Vietnamese society. The burgeoning research on Vietnamese migration can be classified into three main streams. The first strand focuses on the Vietnamese refugee movement after 1975, resettlement policies and their transnational ties with Vietnam, which have been extensively researched (e.g. Dang, 2005; Desbarats, 1987; Hawthorne, 1982; Hitchcox, 1990; Huynh & Yiu, 2012; Pham, 2010; Stone & McGowan, 1980; Thomas, 1999; Viviani, 1984; Young, 1991; Yuen, 1990). The second research strand investigates marriage migration and human trafficking as a result of people's mobility rights in the government's renovation course (e.g. Belanger & Tran, 2011; Hong & Hugo, 2005; ILO, 2006; Wang, 2005). The third research stream is concerned with work migration under the effects of the 1986 Đổi Mới Policy. This strand is sub-divided into two themes: labour export migration as the government's strategy to participate in the global trade and improve the domestic economic condition, and self-initiated professional migration encouraged as the government's strategy to improve human capital stock.

Within the research strand on labour export migration, there are several studies on labour migration to the US, European countries, and emerging economies in Asia (e.g. Cu, 2001; Dang, 2007; Dang, Tacoli, & Hoang, 2003; Dang, Tran, Nguyen, & Dao, 2010). Other studies explore economic impacts of outbound labour migration on households in Vietnam (e.g. Angsuthanasombat, 2007; Dang, 2005; D. T. Nguyen, 2008; V.C. Nguyen, 2008; Nguyen & Mont, 2012). Research on Vietnamese professional migration tends to address problems that skilled migrants face in host countries (e.g. Dang, 2008; Wickramasekara, 2002), as well as patterns and determinants of international skilled migration (e.g. Dang, Tacoli, & Hoang, 2003; Nguyen, 2003; Nguyen, Tran, Nguyen, & Oostendorp, 2008). By placing a focus on student migration and the brain drain, three sub-strands of research have emerged: Vietnamese international student mobility (e.g. AEI, 2011; Choudaha & Chang, 2012; DIAC, 2011a, 2011b; IIE, 2011), motivations of Vietnamese students overseas and their non-returns (Banks, Olsen, & Pearce, 2007; Baruch, Budhwar, & Khatri, 2007; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Gribble, 2011; Nguyen, 2005, 2006), and current trends of returning skilled migrants (Dang, 2003).

However, work migration research, most of which entails both unskilled and professional, collapses Vietnamese skilled migration into a generic Asian migration category, thus blurring distinctive features occurring between the sub-groups of migrants. In addition to the economic model and policy framework that extant research is predominantly using to examine Vietnamese skilled migration, most studies are situated in discrete national contexts, which limit a deep understanding of

how the transnational mobilities of skilled migrants are negotiated. To respond to these existing weaknesses in the current research profile on Vietnamese skilled migration, this article calls for the need to delve into the experiences of Vietnamese skilled migrants who are participants in a fluid, transnational milieu.

This article is structured as follows. It first traces the movement of Vietnamese people instigated by their fear of communism after 1975. This section is followed by a portrayal of a different flow of skilled migrants after 1986 under the economic pressures. This paper then continues to present socio-economic and political conditions after the 1986 *Đổi Mới* Policy that have affected skilled migration. The rest of this paper endeavours to identify major limitations in Vietnamese skilled migration research.

From 1975 to the 1980s: Skilled migration embedded in refugee movements

On 30 April, 1975 the communist army from the North entered Saigon in the South, ending the 30-year civil war in Vietnam. The country was reunified. The change in political leadership and ideology caused a dramatic change in fortune for those who were connected with the former political and administrative regime in the South before 1975 (Thomas, 1999, p. 5). They decided to leave the country for fear of the communists and the poverty resulting from draconian changes enforced by the new communist government (Viviani, 1984, p. 5 & p. 37). Although the Americans made some provision for the departure of around 135,000 of their employees during the last days of April 1975, in such turbulent, chaotic circumstances, many people were left behind (Stone & McGowan, 1980, p. 40). Those who were abandoned were forced to live harsh lives due to their “dark family history” (Young, 1991, p. 306). They suffered from many injustices and inequalities in education, daily life as well as experiencing discrimination in obtaining employment (Desbarats, 1987, p. 48). Many were caught, imprisoned, had their houses and properties confiscated by the new government, while others lost money to unscrupulous dealers to pay for their intended border-crossing escape (Hawthorne, 1982, pp. 117-125; Thomas, 1999, p. 7). Many people, nevertheless, decided to leave the country, even though they were well aware of the perils facing them.

People began to secretly leave the country in two major waves. The first wave from 1975 to mid-1978 mainly included those whose social, economic and political interests were in stark conflict with the new regime’s agenda. The second wave from mid-1978 to the end of 1980s was comprised of those who were feared of social and political changes in Vietnam and those Vietnamese of Chinese origin who faced severe reprisals from the new government caused by the escalating political conflict with China (Thomas, 1999, p. 10; Viviani, 1984, p. 18; Young, 1991, p. 306). While some attempted to cross the border to Cambodia and managed to go through Thailand and Malaysia, others left in small fishing boats aiming to cross the South China Sea to refugee camps in Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and even to far-flung places like Brunei, Australia, Macau,

Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea (Yuen, 1990, pp. 81-82). The number of refugees increased dramatically, rising from only 5,247 departures in 1976 to 21,505 in 1978 (Hitchcox, 1990, p. 72), peaking at 22,000 refugees in the late 1978 and 55,000 in 1979 (Viviani, 1984, pp. 40-42). Amongst these refugees, more than half a million people escaped, but many, estimated at 40,000, were stranded in refugee camps in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia (Thomas, 1999, p. 10). Although the exact number of professional migrants of the 3.5 million Vietnamese refugees has never been recorded, it can be assumed that many refugees with higher education qualifications left the country due to the prevalent political and economic pressures.

From 1986 to 1996: Skilled migration directed to communist countries

After the nation's unification in 1975, Vietnam's economy was challenged by an economic crisis resulting from the Soviet-style centralized economic and political management system. In 1986, the Sixth Communist Party Congress of Vietnam decided to remove the centrally-planned model of socialism and adopt a market-oriented socialist economy. The government was committed to "go[ing] deeper in foreign relations with other communist countries" as a strategy to enhance multilateral relations with other "brother countries" (The Communist Party of Vietnam, 1986, pp. 3-8). Market socialism and multilateralism were the new foci in the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation or Open Door) Policy. Attempting to industrialize the country by 2020, the government restructured the economy and continued to sustain foreign relations with the communist countries to obtain technological and financial support from these states (The Communist Party of Vietnam, 1986). In particular, the government sustained the diplomatic relations with the USSR and the communist community, showing their willingness to participate in the international labour division and cooperation with these partner states.

The government sent both skilled and semi-skilled workers to these countries. This was seen as a strategic export enterprise. Workers on the labour cooperation programs were viewed as "an organic component of the labour scheme for mutual support" (The Communist Party of Vietnam, 1986, p. 9) between Vietnam and the communist countries. In fact, the sending of their workers was practiced to solve domestic unemployment and increase national revenue (*Ha Noi Moi Newspaper*, 2011; Dang, 2007, 2008). Skilled migration in the form of labour export earned 800 billion VND and more than 300 million US dollars in the late 1980s (Department of Overseas Labour [DOLAB], 2005). During the period from 1986 to 1989, 244,186 skilled and semi-skilled people were sent to the USSR, Eastern Germany, Slovakia, and Hungary through the intergovernmental treaties (DOLAB, 2005). Similarly, another group of 7,200 skilled workers in healthcare, education and agriculture was sent to Libya, Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, Congo, and Madagascar for technical support (*Ha Noi Moi Newspaper*, 2011). Vietnam allowed 24,000 technical interns to work and students to study in the USSR in order to help the government maintain the Vietnam-USSR Treaty of Friendship and

Cooperation signed in 1978. At the same time, thousands of Vietnamese students were offered scholarships to study in European socialist countries under the Socialist Council on Mutual Economic Assistance (Welch, 2010, p. 201). While many skilled workers and students did not return home after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe (Chesnokov, 2011, p. 24), the migration trend from Vietnam to Russia has been rarely researched

After the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR in 1991, the outflows skilled migration from Vietnam were shaped by two policies. First, Politburo Resolution Number 13 issued in 1988 proposed an action agenda for the multi-directional foreign policy (Thayer & Amer, 1999, p. 2). Following this, Vietnam withdrew their army troops from Cambodia, began normalizing its foreign relations with China, extended the existing relations with ASEAN, and expanded its foreign relations with Western, Northern European countries and Japan. The action plan in this resolution allowed Vietnam to “expand [its] relations to more countries and private enterprises in the capitalist world” (Thayer & Amer, 1999, p. 11). In 1994, the US lifted its embargo, and this enabled Vietnam to extend the foreign relations to a wider international community in addition to the remaining communist states. This resolution also recognized potential contributions of overseas Vietnamese refugees to the development processes (The Communist Party of Vietnam, 1996, p. 10). Second, Vietnam began to commercialize labour export services. The Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) was empowered to manage the flows of the international labour population. Article One in Decree 370/HĐBT in 1991 legalized labour export as a socio-economic strategy that helped solve domestic unemployment, increase national income, and enhance economic and technological exchanges with other countries (Ministry of Justice, 1991). These two policies have made labour migration an export industry to a wider market. Due to the political chaos in Eastern Europe, the Gulf War and economic depressions in Africa, the Government changed their labour export directions to new markets in North Eastern Asia, South East Asia, Northern Africa, and the South Pacific. While 1,022 skilled workers were sent overseas in the labour export program in 1991, this figure rose to 12,600 in 1996 (DOLAB, 2005). In other words, the flow of professional workers in this period was mainly controlled and managed by the government as their political initiative to roll out to the world.

From 1996 to current: Skilled migration on a contractual and self-initiated basis

Since the late 1990s, the government has encouraged an outflow of skilled workers to Western countries as one of the development tools. However, the non-return of an unrecorded number of these migrants has culminated in a loss of talents for the national development course, which the government has associated with brain drain. The following sections presents the current pattern of Vietnamese skilled migration

and illustrates the government's attempt to call for expatriates' returns for contributions.

Sending skilled workers overseas as the government's development tool

After 1991, the country saw some major changes in its foreign relations. In 1995, Vietnam joined ASEAN and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) (The Communist Party of Vietnam, 1996, p. 5). The government established diplomatic ties with 176 countries and trade ties with more than 120 countries (M. C. Nguyen, 2008, p. 1). This transformation in the foreign relations produced a dramatic transformation in international economic relations which, in turn, instigated greater demands for human capacity building to boost the national development processes.

To respond to this situation, the government implemented several strategies. By recognizing the connections of 3.5 million Vietnamese refugees living overseas to their roots in Vietnam, the government called for Vietnamese expatriates (*Việt kiều*) to return to Vietnam for national contributions, and they were considered as "an inseparable part of the Vietnamese nationality" (Nong, 2006, p. 10). In practice, Decision 08-NQ/TW in 1993, which was later revised by Decision 40/2004/QH11 in 2004, paved favourable ways for Vietnamese expatriates to return (Vu, 2005). *Việt kiều* could rent houses in Vietnam on a long-term basis, establish branches for their foreign based companies, enjoy income tax reduction, and get support for paperwork submission. In addition, the government's diplomatic relations which had previously privileged interactions with the communist bloc were transformed to a multilateral direction by being "friends with all countries" (M. C. Nguyen, 2008, p. 1). The government also prioritized the training of skilled human resources in science and technology. Decision Number 579/QĐ-TTg on Vietnam's Human Capacity Building Strategy considered human capacity as the most important priority for the country "to develop sustainably, advance in the international arena, integrate globally, and stabilize the society" (The Central Government, 2011, p. 1). In particular, Decision Number 579/QĐ-TTg aimed to offer chances for 2,170,500 highly skilled workers and tertiary lecturers to take postgraduate programs in public administration, policy planning, international law, science, technology, healthcare, finance, banking, and information technology in foreign countries within the period from 2010 to 2020 (The Central Government, 2011, p. 3).

To achieve the target of Decision Number 579/QĐ-TTg, the government has improved human capital in three main ways. First, the number of higher education institutions was extended, from 103 in 1993 to 322 in 2007 (Hayden & Lam, 2010, pp. 16-17; MOET, 2009, p. 9) with 212 twinning academic programs (VIED, 2013). Expenditures on education have been prioritized as the third largest social investment since 2012 (The Central Government, 2012). Second, since 2000, the government has encouraged a large number of students and lecturers to study abroad, from approximately 60,000 in 2008 to 100,000 in 2011 in 49 countries through governmental or international scholarship sources and students' personal

finances (Foreign Press Centre, 2008; MOET 2009). Third, unskilled and skilled workers have been sent other countries as a measure to participate in the global market (Dang, 2007, 2008; The Central Government, 2011). Although the third strategy is not seen as a direct measure for improving the quality of the labour workforce, it is one of the long-term solutions for reducing the unemployment rate, increasing socio-economic benefits, improving skills and knowledge, and expanding positive qualities brought home by these migrants (MOLISA, 2012). In other words, as Gribble (2008) notes on the policy options of sending countries in regulating the flows of students and skilled workers, the Vietnamese government has attempted to retain students at the tertiary level by enhancing the domestic higher education provision capacity, encouraging students to study abroad and promoting them to return after graduation, and calling for expatriates' contributions.

Within the international labour flows in and from Asia of 191 million migrants (UN, 2006, p. 29), Vietnam has recently become one of the source countries of labour (Asis & Piper, 2008, p. 426). In the late 1990s Vietnam exported 121,752 workers to 40 countries and territories (Nguyen, 2003, p. 404), and this number increased to 400,000 in 50 countries and territories (ILO, 2007, p. 55). According to DOLAB (2012), the total number of contracted Vietnamese workers overseas in 2012 alone was 40,115 with a majority working in ASEAN countries, China, the Middle East, and Russia. Labour export has earned Vietnam 1.5 billion US dollars annually, equivalent to six per cent of the country's total export value (Dang, Tacoli, & Hoang, 2003, p. i), making Vietnam one of the top ten countries of labour export since 1999 (*Vietnam Investment Review*, 2011). In 2011 alone, Vietnam received a total amount of nine billion US dollars from international remittances generated by both Vietnamese refugees and migrants, accounting eight per cent of its GDP (DIAC, 2012, p. 1). In contrast, skilled migration is initiated on a voluntary basis. Skilled workers with their foreign language proficiency, usually English, and professional knowledge can initiate their migration to Australia, the US, the UK, Italy, Sweden, New Zealand, and Canada (Dang, 2007, p. 8). Between 2001 and 2002, 82,000 workers in which 35.5 per cent were skilled went to foreign countries on work contracts.

Brain drain and the government's call for expatriates' returns

The outflows of skilled workers have culminated in a side-effect when a significant number of students and self-initiated skilled migrants are reported to fail to return to Vietnam, causing a perceived brain drain. In response to the loss of human capital, the government has reached Vietnamese expatriate communities to pull them back for economic and intellectual contributions. Politburo Resolution Number 13 in 1988 initially called for contributions from overseas Vietnamese communities. Recent policies have ratified practical action agendas to attract the return of both refugees and non-return students in the guise of "ethnic solidarity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007, p. 1). Many physical incentives and favourable conditions are

drafted to pull back highly skilled expatriates such as Decision Number 21/2009/QĐ-UBND DN (Da Nang People's Committee, 2009), Decision Number 03/2009/QĐ-UBND HY (Hung Yen People's Committee, 2009), Decision 44/2010/QĐ-UBND CT (Can Tho People's Committee, 2010), Decision Number 579 (The Central Government, 2011), to name but a few. These decisions aim to attract talented people (known as *nhân tài*) by offering those holding Masters' and PhD. qualifications financial rewards, accommodation benefits, and employment for their spouses. Decree Number 135/2007/QĐ-TTg also announced visa exemption of a 90-day stay in Vietnam for Vietnamese expatriates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007). In addition to their temporary status in Vietnam, they can, by retaining their Vietnamese citizenship since July 1, 2009, stay as long as they want and are entitled to full rights accorded to other Vietnam-domiciled citizens (Ministry of Justice, 2008).

Limitations in current Vietnamese skilled migration research

The increasing growth of international migration for work and talent attraction policies have encouraged migration research to focus on the economic influences of international migration as well as motivations for migration and return. However, as one of the most common challenges in research into Asian migration which seems to be a "running commentary of a phenomenon in progress" (Asis & Piper, 2008, p. 427), research on Vietnamese skilled migration is not always well-supported due to the lack of statistics and harmonization among reporting systems (Asis & Piper, 2008, p. 428; Gribble, 2011, p. 294). By reviewing the body of related literature, the section below addresses major limitations in current research on Vietnamese skilled migration.

Research situated in discrete national contexts

Current studies tend to situate the flow of Vietnamese skilled migrants under the social and political transformations associated with Vietnam's integration into the global economy without acknowledging economic, social or political changes in receiving countries. In fact, some focus on exploring the impacts of the Đổi Mới Policy on migration from Vietnam (e.g. Dang, Tacoli, & Hoang, 2003; Dang, Tran, Nguyen, & Dao, 2010; Nguyen, 2003; Nguyen, Tran, Nguyen, & Oostendorp, 2008). For example, driven by the attempt to explore current professional migration patterns in Vietnam, Dang, Tran, Nguyen and Dao (2010) analyse both the economic and social impacts of Vietnamese skilled and low-skilled migration within the period of Vietnam's integration into the global trade. Although this study measures the economic, educational, gender, health and social impacts of skilled migration in Vietnam, it does not investigate the impacts of this type of migration on the receiving societies or possible macro-contextual influences from these countries on Vietnamese professional immigration. In the same vein, Dang, Tacoli and Hoang (2003) examine the removal and relaxation of regulations as part of Vietnam's economic reform since 1986, which has influenced international skilled and

unskilled labour mobility in Vietnam. This study fails to examine changes in migration policies in destination countries, a glaring gap considering that social, political or economic changes in host countries are known to affect migration flows (Castles & Miller, 2009; Hugo, 2000; Iredale, 2000). For instance, the recent strengthening of the skilled migration policies has been considered as instrumental in contributing to Australia's challenges in skills shortages and aging population, but the global financial crisis and the resultant economic downturn have triggered the Australian government to reduce the quota of professional migrants under the banner of protecting local jobs (Koleth, 2010, pp. 2-4). While Vietnamese skilled migration to Australia is increasing, making Vietnam the ninth largest source country of professional migrants in Australia in 2006-2010 (DIAC, 2010a) with 2,228 Vietnamese skilled migrants (DIAC, 2010b, p. 68), there is little research exploring the influences of social, economic and political changes in Australia on skilled migration from Vietnam.

By solely situating the research context within Vietnam, current studies are unable to illustrate the relational effects in the global migration network and possible distinctive features of migration policies among countries. As Asis and Piper (2008) notice, research on Asian migration generally tends to be conducted either at the sending or destination country, and this lacks a "region-wide analysis" (p. 430). Even when studies engage in a region-wide analysis, there is a failure to acknowledge the differences between ethnicities as well as macro-level influences on migrants. The lack of a systematic analysis of reciprocal influences in the migration network poses a challenge to extant studies which generally do not acknowledge political, social, and economic conditions in both host and receiving countries. In contrast, the growth of globalization is said to embody "a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions" (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999, p. 16) on the world scale which makes cross-border flows of people reach an unprecedented level (Castles & Miller, 2009). Extant research on Vietnamese professional migration does not acknowledge the effects of migration on receiving societies and how migrants from Vietnam negotiate macro-level changes to make sense of their transnational movement. In this sense, these studies are often disconnected to the global migration context and limited in examining the influence of "ethnicity" on migrants' career choices (Ariss, 2010, p. 353) and the ways migrants make sense of their lives.

Applications of relevant theoretical frameworks

Many studies on skilled and semi-skilled migration from Vietnam employ either an economic model or a policy framework to examine their motivations and the impacts of migration on their families in Vietnam. For example, Cu (2001) attempts to evaluate the economic impacts of both inward and outward labour migration in Vietnam from a policy-maker perspective. In positioning this viewpoint in the policy discourse, this report simply represents a governmental position on their control over

migration for labour services that bring concrete economic benefits to Vietnamese society. Dang, Tacoli and Hoang (2003) similarly trace the past and current trends of migration in Vietnam under the influence of changes in policies since 1986. Although this comprehensive report is able to present significant features of Vietnamese labour migration and provide appropriate recommendations to the government, it consolidates the view that the main motive for international labour migration in Vietnam has always been the economic attractions on offer in receiving countries.

In terms of examining the economic benefits of international migration, many studies focus on analysing the effects of remittances sent to their families in Vietnam. For example, by employing fixed-effect regressions in a quantitative study of 4,200 households in Vietnam, Nguyen and Mont (2012) evaluate the impacts of remittances sent by contracted skilled and unskilled labour Vietnamese migrants on households' investment in land and housing, and indicate that current international remittances cannot be seen as an effective measure for poverty reduction. This finding shares some similar conclusions withdrawn from some studies in development economics. D. T. Nguyen (2008) uses computable general equilibrium modelling techniques, and V. C. Nguyen's (2008) quantitative study examines the effects of remittances on 4,008 households in Vietnam. V. C. Nguyen (ibid.) finds that foreign remittances have slight effects on poverty reduction but create inequality to a small degree. Although a positive effect of the growing international remittances on expenditures and poverty reduction in rural areas in Vietnam is commonly found (e.g. Angsuthanasombat, 2007; Nguyen, Tran, Nguyen, & Oostendorp, 2008), Nguyen and Mont (2012), D. T. Nguyen (2008) and V. C. Nguyen (2008) collectively refute these findings by demonstrating that most international remittances are sent to non-poor families mostly located in urban areas. These researchers argue that the impact of international labour migration is limited in terms of ameliorating poverty. In this vein, despite the on-going argument about economic contribution of international migration, together with the absence of migrants' voices, extant research on Vietnamese professional migration generally tends to view migrants as rational actors who fulfil the meaning of their lives by the pursuit of money.

However, not all skilled migrants embrace economic choices as the ultimate motivation for migration. Research on skilled migration in the Asian context drawing upon a broad selection of theoretical frameworks has demonstrated that migrants hold various expectations for their transnational mobility. For example, by examining how race and nationality are experienced in the cosmopolitan navigation of social and professional interactions of Singaporean professional migrants in London, Ho (2011) concludes that these migrants selectively mix and match different cultures to fit in or differentiate themselves from others. The purpose of opting for cosmopolitan ways of living is for them to pursue professional

advancement in the destination country. In addition, through the lens of cosmopolitanism, Fujita (2004) finds that cultural factors act as the primary driver that induces migration of young Japanese professional people to Western countries where they can lead a “normal life” (p. 32) and acquire “distinction” (p. 33) in the field of cultural production. By employing phenomenology as the theoretical framework, Madison (2006) finds a search for employment, career advancement or economic conditions does not exist as authentic motives for self-initiated migrants, but rather, their motivation resides in a quest for seeking more options for self-actualizing within foreign cultures. In contrast, by examining the coherence and fragmentation in China’s migration policies through an ethnographic lens, Biao (2003) confirms that Chinese skilled migrants tend to seek opportunities for enhancing career advancement in western countries. Furthermore, by looking at Chinese skilled migration in Canada and basing his argument on the tension between transnationalism and nationalism that influence skilled migrants’ choice to remain or return, Teo (2011) affirms that the migrants’ concept of home is fluid, as they “gaze” which “moon” (p. 817) is brighter for not only their lives but also for their children’s future. While transnationalism has recently become one of the dominant conceptual frameworks used to examine the processes in which migrants create or make use of cross-border social fields (e.g. Basch, Glick-Schiller, & Blanc, 1996; Biao, 2011; Faist, 2000; Keren, Guo, & Ping, 2003; Teo, 2011; Tseng, 2011; Vertovec, 2009), other studies (e.g. McIlwaine, 2008; Yeoh, 2003) have adopted a post-colonialism stance to further understand the processes of international migration from the “global South to North” (McIlwaine, 2008, p. 1) among sending countries which have colonial ties with receiving countries. Such a perspective aims to attend to the materiality of migration and everyday experiences of migrants and examine the intersections between post-colonialism and development as well as the cultural politics of identity and belonging.

In spite of a number of diverse theories emerging, current research on skilled migration from Vietnam is limited in the application of various conceptual frameworks that could otherwise provide credibility in examining migrants’ authentic motives through their lived experiences. Present economic models or policy frameworks cannot always provide a full understanding of migrants’ motives. They may limit further understandings about how professional migrants make sense of their lives. As Asis and Piper (2008) have noted about research on Asian migration, empirical studies on Vietnamese skilled migration need to “advance from the descriptive to the more theoretical level of explanation” (p. 432) through the exposure of theoretical grounding that attends to the ways that migrants make sense of their lives.

Empirical research on transnationalism

The use of transnationalism has emerged as one of the popular conceptual frameworks in migration studies. In contrast, research on the sustainment of

Vietnamese migrants' transnational social fields is still limited. Vietnamese skilled migrants' transnational activities and fields are often examined in relation to effects of government policies within a "container model of society" (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2002, p. 309). In exploring the transnational relationships between migrants and their communities, a large body of research has focused on Vietnamese refugees and transnational ties with their communities in Vietnam (e.g. Dang, 2005; Huynh & Yiu, 2012) and the effects of remittances (e.g. Cu, 2001; Dang, 2008; Dang, Tacoli, & Hoang, 2003; Dang, Tran, Nguyen, & Dao, 2010; Nguyen, 2003; V.C. Nguyen, 2008; Nguyen, Tran, Nguyen, & Oostendorp, 2008). However, scant attention has been paid to possible transnational practices between recent skilled migrants and established Vietnamese overseas communities or their negotiations of such relationships in making sense of their migration experience. Further, with regard to transitional relationships between skilled migrants and their families in Vietnam, Dang, Tran, Nguyen, and Dao (2010, p. 1180) find that 80 per cent of the households keep contacts with their overseas migrant relatives at least once a month, and this figure suggests a strong link between migrants and their families. As mentioned earlier, current research on Vietnamese professional migration remains situated in a discrete national outlook. Therefore, the lack of empirical research on transnationalism sustained by recent skilled migrants may limit understandings about the complexity of migrants' motivations, expectations and aspirations shaped by their interactions with the surrounding environment, and thus cannot always portray the meaning of migrants' trajectories.

For these reasons, future studies should focus on clarifying the motives and aspirations of Vietnamese skilled migrants through the lens of transnationalism. Exploring the meaning of their migration experience within a framework of interpersonal dynamics situated in particular environments constitutes a "bottom-up" approach where migrants are depicted as active agents who make sense of their transnational mobilities through their interactions with various social structures. Such studies acknowledging and reflecting individual experiences can be seen as a timely response to migration scholars' (e.g. Conradson & Latham, 2005; Favell, Feldblum, & Smith, 2006) calls for studies on transnational mobilities which allow many voices to be heard. Such studies on transnationalism in Vietnamese skilled migration through this "bottom-up" approach may challenge assumptions held in policy discourse which portray skilled migration reductively in economic terms as the flows of human capital between discrete nations, disregarding the agents' transnational ties. This research approach has the potential to bring a more dynamic perspective to current migration research methodologies by contextualizing Vietnamese skilled migration within a frame of interactions occurring between global and national level processes as well as the lived experiences of individuals.

Migrants' lived experiences in interactions with the surrounding environment

While examining migrants' lived experiences in making sense of their migration as active agents is crucial, macro-level research on Vietnamese skilled migration often fails to provide an understanding of the complexity of forces and influences impacting on the lives of individual migrants. In fact, by examining how the Vietnamese government initiates the overseas labour programs through their support channels provided by labour service brokers and DOLAB, and by using secondary sources and large-scale surveys, current studies on Vietnamese migration point out that the main determinant of labour migration from Vietnam is the economic factor (e.g. Dang, Tacoli, & Hoang, 2003; Dang, Tran, Nguyen, & Dao, 2010; V. C. Nguyen, 2008; Nguyen, Tran, Nguyen, & Oostendorp, 2008). Yet, because these studies examine the inclusion of both skilled and semi-skilled migrants, distinctive differences in migrants' motivations and other contextual factors have largely been neglected.

In contrast, a growth of research on professional migration in destination countries has found that migrants' motives can be shaped by a multitude of both internal and external factors (e.g. Ackers, 2004; Baas, 2006; Bhagwati, 2004; Madison, 2006). Success in professional migration is determined through migrants' everyday lives and fulfilment of their aspirations (e.g. Fujita, 2004; Ho, 2011; Madison, 2006). In other words, as Favell, Feldblum and Smith (2006, p. 5) note, macro-level studies often examine the influences of migration policies on migrants without considering their voices and experiences of the whole their migratory processes, despite the fact that skilled migration ultimately remains the decision of the individual. Figures and statistics do not sufficiently cast light on their lives or allow their voices to be heard. In this vein, research on Vietnamese international labour migration tends to neglect the facts that "we are a life to live" (Blattner, 2006, p. 36) who dynamically connects to others (Heidegger, 1962). Migrants can never step outside the influence of the surrounding environment as they are immersed in the political, economic, and social milieu in making sense of their lives.

Vietnamese labour and skilled migration within the Asian migration context

While attending to migrants' voices is essential to understand the meaning of mobilities, current research on Vietnamese skilled migration is unable to address such a demand because of the emphasis on migration by Asians as an amorphous group. As mentioned above, extant research on Vietnamese international labour migration often examines the flows of Vietnamese labour migrants as a sub-group within the larger movement of Asian migrants (e.g. Dang, 2003, 2008; Dang, Tran, Nguyen, & Dao, 2010; Nguyen, 2003). Because current studies tend to combine both low-skilled and highly-skilled migrants in a single group, they fail to acknowledge that highly-skilled migrants can be two-step migrants who initiate their migration through international education as the first step to permanent migration (Hawthorne, 2005, 2010, 2011). Even within the skilled migrant group, there are other sub-groups such as those who have studied in a foreign country but migrate for

work in another country, or those with a Vietnamese education background who seek to work in a foreign country.

In addition, like other government reports on the statistics of international labour migration which are grouped in one type (e.g. DIAC, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b; MOLISA, 2008, 2009), current studies are unable to generate different interpretations of the actual motives and complexities in skilled migrants' lives. While the number of self-initiated skilled migrants is not always properly or well recorded in the Vietnamese government's reports, the outflows of two-step migrants on the world's scale are increasing, particularly to the five top skilled migrant-receiving countries: the US, the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Hawthorne, 2005, p. 663). In other words, extant research on Vietnamese migration does not involve a proper examination of social, political and economic transformations as well as migration policies in receiving societies. Further, most studies on labour migration in Vietnam tend to be narrowly-focused on unskilled migration because as mentioned earlier, labour export is one of the government's strategic ways to solve unemployment, increase income and participate in the global market.

Further, while there are a few studies addressing the motivations of Vietnamese professionals' emigration and return (e.g. Cu, 2001; Dang, 2003, 2007, 2010; Nguyen, 2003), the receiving countries that are researched are not the only ones that attract Vietnamese skilled migrants. While Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and East Europe are the most common destinations for skilled migrants from Vietnam, Australia, the US and Canada have recently emerged as the popular destinations for Vietnamese skilled migrants (Iredale, 2000, p. 887). As such, by taking Vietnam as the sending country's perspective and examining particular classes of migrants separately, future research can avoid beclouding distinctive features among different migrant groups in receiving countries and characterize major migration trends and patterns among Vietnamese skilled migrants more comprehensively.

Empirical research on brain drain

As mentioned previously, skilled migrants from Vietnam also include outbound students who seek employment and residency opportunities elsewhere in the world after graduation, causing a brain drain in Vietnam. Although the topical debate over the current brain drain has entered the political discourse in Vietnam (Gribble, 2011), few studies have been undertaken to explore this phenomenon. In fact, by calculating the emigration rate of college graduates in 2000 and using a stylized growth model to assess the magnitude, intensity and determinants of brain drain in different countries, Docquier and Rapoport (2012, p. 687) briefly mention that Vietnam is one of the countries with the highest rates of brain drain, amounting to 26.9 per cent of the country's trained stock. In contrast, by measuring the confidence interval in a quantitative study including 189 Vietnamese students at an Australian

university in response to the “push” and “pull” factors that influence their choice to go abroad for work or return to Vietnam after graduation, Nguyen (2006, p. 10) finds that it is 95 per cent certain that the participants choose to return home upon the completion of their studies. These quantitative studies are able to address the general patterns of skilled and would-be two-step migration as a feature of globalization forces in the knowledge-based economy. However, they fail to acknowledge the systemic effects of migration policies in the receiving and sending countries as well as migrants’ voices involving multi-level negotiations of contextual factors and individual aspirations. Brain drain in Vietnam, in other words, is a phenomenon that remains unregistered in the repositories of professional knowledge.

By arguing that Vietnam’s current brain drain is partly caused by non-returning students, Gribble (2011) addresses the need to further examine the link between international education and skilled migration. Although there are several studies focusing on Vietnamese international student mobility (e.g. Banks, Olsen, & Pearce, 2007; Carpenter, Castro, & Mingo, 2010; Le, 2011; Tran, 2009), they do not present the link between Vietnamese students’ international education and two-step migration. Again, current government reports (e.g. AEI, 2011; DIAC, 2011a, 2011b) incline to include the flows of Vietnamese students as a sub-group within the larger group of Southeast Asian students initiated and sustained by economic rationales in the receiving societies without clearly examining the link between international education and migration. As Choudaha and Chang (2012, p. 10) suggest, while the number of outbound international students from Southeast Asia is increasing, current research should address both on-campus student diversity and attractions from international education as well as recruitment strategies including migration prospects from emerging markets like Vietnam. Given the fact that Vietnamese student outbound mobility is increasing which causes the supposed brain drain in Vietnam, there needs to be empirical research on the link between international migration and two-step migration from Vietnam. In exploring this interplay, prospective research of this issue must attend to the macro-contextual transformations in both receiving countries and Vietnam, and at the same time focus on migrants’ lived experiences.

Specifically, in the first instance, research dealing with such a nexus should pay close attention to the Vietnamese political, social and economic contexts because outward student mobility has recently been politicized as a development tool. The dilemma in current government policies is that the outbound flow of Vietnamese students has been endorsed as the strategic measure for the government to open the door to participate in the wider international community and increase human capacity building. Simultaneously, in recognizing the potential loss of professional capital, pressure has mounted to retain and engage overseas trained graduates to return and contribute to the country’s priorities. In other words, it is

possible that a brain drain focus be reframed as brain gain or brain exchange when governments of sending countries attempt to design attractive diasporic strategies to reach out to expatriates' communities for contributions (Giannocolo, 2004). However, there is little research investigating transnational practices that skilled migrants from Vietnam may sustain to make sense of their transnational contributions and return. Amidst the paucity of research, Dang (2003) explores the motivations for Vietnamese expatriates' return and contributions by addressing some factors related to the government's incentives that encourage skilled migrants' return. However, because Dang (ibid.) focuses on migrants who have achieved their educational qualifications both in Vietnam and abroad, he does not explore reasons for return among recent two-step migrants, and thus is unable to argue for the possible link between international education, residency and return. Given the fact that their overseas residency becomes temporary under the attraction of the Vietnamese government's policies for their living and employment prospects, Dang (ibid.) does not acknowledge any possible transnational ties or the contributions these migrants might make both during and after their migration.

Finally, in exploring the nexus between international education and migration, future research must be attentive to the fact that two-step migrants may embrace various motivations for migration. Because students-turned-migrants do not belong to a homogenous group, their motivations for education and migration are multifaceted. Some are classified as economic student migrants who want to compensate for their study journey costs and maximize earning outputs in their professions (Baas, 2006; Bhagwati, 2004) or increase long-term employment opportunities (Biao, 2003; Waters, 2007). Others decide to reside in the host country due to the cultural appeal of the West (Fujita, 2004), their projects of cosmopolitan self-fashioning (Ho, 2011), or their desire to seek possibilities for self-actualizing in a foreign land (Madison, 2006). Still for others, migration after education is seen as an escape from political turmoil at home (Mountford, 1997) or a way to reunite their family members and join social networks (Ackers, 2004). Their motives can be instrumental or intrinsic, and their residence decision may be shaped and reshaped by their families and personal aspirations under the influence of macro-contextual factors (Syed & Ozbilgin, 2007; Tran & Nyland, 2011). As such, as mentioned above, by moving away from human capital discourses in examining the brain drain, future research could benefit from attending to the ways professional migrants from Vietnam actively make sense of their transnational mobilities to meet their work and life aspirations, which are shaped by their interactions with the surrounding environment.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the three major stages in skilled migration from Vietnam since 1975. With the 1986 Đổi Mới Policy embracing market socialism and multilateralism, the government has committed to participate in a wider international

community as one of the development strategies. Aiming to increase the human capital stock for development, they have endeavoured to send an increasing number of both skilled and semi-skilled workers to foreign countries on bilateral agreements as labour export and encourage an outbound movement of self-initiated skilled workers. Among the self-initiated migrant group are an unrecorded number of students who study overseas but do not return home after graduation, causing a supposed brain drain in Vietnam.

Within the existing body of literature on skilled migration in Vietnam, six limitations have been identified in this paper. They include (1) a discrete nationalism outlook, (2) a limited use of relevant conceptual frameworks, (3) a lack of empirical evidence on transnationalism, (4) a lack of migrants' voices, (5) the inclusion of Vietnamese migrants in Asian migrant groups, and (6) a lack of empirical research on brain drain. While it is commonly believed that all different aspects and complexities of migration cannot be covered in one single study, this article suggests that future research adopt a relevant theoretical framework which attends to exploring professional migrants' lived experiences in relation to their interactions with the surrounding environment. As such, the economic conceptual framework used in current research on Vietnamese migration should be qualified in a way that addresses migrants' authentic motives and aspirations.

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