

## Skilled Migrants' Negotiations of Citizenship and Belonging

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### Abstract

This article analyses the negotiations of citizenship and belonging among Vietnamese skilled migrants in Australia through Heidegger's (1962) concept of temporality in *being-in-the-world*. In line with Heidegger's notion of temporality in *being-in-the-world*, this quote suggests the significance of our past to our present as well as the opening of possibilities through time. The temporality feature is present in our interactions with the world over time that shapes who we are and will be. This article examines the 5 participants' historicity and their present ways of being manifest in their multiple, practical uses of citizenship and belonging. These influences are examined through their interactions with others and things in the world, including their uses of transnational relationships over time. The findings of this study confirm conclusions withdrawn from the current body of research on transnational mobilities and citizenship in that citizenship can be used as practical equipment for skilled migrants to make sense of their transnational belongings to both societies.

**Keywords:** Citizenship, belonging, Vietnamese skilled migration, Australian skilled immigration, two-step migration, phenomenology, being-in-the-world

### 1. Introduction

Perceptions and experiences of mobilities which are influenced by nation-states' political and socio-cultural ideologies affect the constructions of migrants' sense of belonging and citizenships, which may influence back their mobilities. Citizenships and sense of belonging are produced within the intersection of social, familial, political, cultural and even religious networks that allow migrants to stay and feel belong to more than one state (Glick-Schiller, 1999, p. 202). Citizenship is often perceived to be comprised of migrants' concerns with their families and community practices that influence how they position themselves in the relation to others. It can be "negotiated relationships" (Stasiulis & Bakan, 1997, p. 112), which is subject migrants' actions towards social, political, economic, cultural, and familial contexts and conflicts.

Exploring these confluences among Vietnamese skilled migrants in Australia is the focus of this paper. The researcher expects to understand how these migrants make sense of their belonging: whether their success in securing Australian citizenship means their attachment to Australian society, or whether they use their Australian citizenship to secure their ambivalent belonging to both Vietnamese and Australian society. If the latter were the case, how would they maintain their multiple belongings?

How would they negotiate their citizenship and belongings? What would such negotiations mean to them?

Citizenship is often expressed in the legal status and documents such as passports and citizens' rights and responsibilities. Belonging is similarly expressed in these statuses and documents, but it also shows individuals' expectations and aspirations to be emotionally, culturally, religiously and/or politically attached to certain societies that can span across national borders and geographical locales. There can be both a convergence and divergence between the two terms. They are negotiated when skilled migrants (or general migrants) attempt to make sense of their mobilities through their embeddedness in the world with others across spaces. In line with this understanding, this study adopts Heidegger's (1962) notion of being-in-the-world with the feeling of being at-home and not-at-home.

This study is part of a larger project that involve more participants and focus on the negotiations of transnational mobilities among skilled migrants from Vietnam to Australia. By taking out 5 accounts that clearly show the meanings of citizenship and belonging, the author hopes to offer a different methodological avenue that can allow us to explore the interrelated meanings of citizenship and belonging through an existentialist perspective.

## **2. Transnational perspectives on citizenship and belonging**

Normally, we tend to perceive citizenship as rights and obligations towards the nation where we live. In terms of migration, citizenship is perceived as the passport issued by the host country, and the home country in case of dual citizenships. Faist (2000) formulates citizenships as the "institutionalization of the political syntax of social and symbolic ties" (p. 23). Citizenships are normally institutionalized as legal relationships between individuals and the nation-state, granting to "deserving" individuals on the basis of achievement, natural attributes, or biological origin (Stasiulis & Bakan, 1997, p. 115). The "ideal" type of citizenships assumes that such legal relationships are "static", and "linear condition or status" (Stasiulis & Bakan, 1997, p. 118). The notion of citizenship(s) can be constructed through migrants' sustainment of kinship, which reshape their relations to the nation-state. The nation-state is not experienced as an objective domain or mechanism with passports, visas, and policies as an expression of sovereignty, and selectivity in terms of migration. Migrants' encounter with citizenship is embodied through the ways they practice transnational activities in civil space. The manifestation of (dual) citizenships is not necessarily tied to residential status, but it carries "moral connotations of responsibility, respectability, legitimacy, and quality" of their transnational lives (Yeoh & Huang, 1999, p. 1163).

While the physical presentation of citizenship is the passport, which approves the legal status of residency of migrants in host and home societies, their sense of belonging makes sense of this legal evidence. While national citizenship shows migrants' assimilation to the uniformed political culture, migrants negotiate how they utilize their belonging to host and home societies with their transnational belonging. One of the forces that attracts migrants to maintain their feet in two locales is their attempt to sustain the meaning of their ethnicity. Ethnicity can be seen as the "self-identification of the members mediated by the perceptions of others" (Venkatesh, 1995, p. 33), or as the "identification of us" in contrast to the "categorization of them" as racism in anthropology (Eriksen, 2002, p. 6). Then ethnicity is experienced through identity which is often seen as a shared understanding of oneself within a group about who they are. Yet, differences between individuals and groups make identity a

changeable and mutable characteristic (Nagel, 2002). According to Hall (1996), identity is constructed through differences. Specifically, it is constructed through one's relation to others which includes what they share in common, and what they do not. The relation between oneself to others with reference to commonalities and differences is constituted by "constitutive outside" influences and "normative regulations" that form, constrain, and shape who they are (Hall, 1996, pp. 4 & 13). In this sense, identities are produced within "specific historical and institutional sites" with "specific modalities of power" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Identities are points of recognition of identification and attachment (Hall, 1996, p. 5) as well as differences. Due to differences and adaptation to differences, identities are not a fixed but mutable.

Maintaining ties with those who are in home and other countries is significant to skilled migrants. For example, Ehrkamp (2005) found that Turkish immigrants in Germany maintain close ties with their home country by building communal places in Germany with traditional practices, and frequent home visits. Yet, their travel patterns tend to be located to coastal tourist destinations in Turkey instead of spending more time in their towns of origin. The ways they enact ties to Turkey, in this sense, are found neither fixed nor static. Their sustainment of identity is not de-territorialized. Migrants form identities that "cut across and displace national boundaries" and challenge the "fixed notions of belonging" in relation to their experiences of place (Dwyer, 2000, p. 475) and ethnicity. However, such a concept as the "hybrid" or "double" identities experienced as the "third space" (Kaya, 2002, p. 59) between their home and host societies, or between assimilation and ethnicity, entailed a significant amount of uneven power relations.

In short, this study takes on board the concepts citizenship as a legal status and belonging through skilled migrants' experience of ethnicity, identity, and transnational ties. This is an overlapping field between socio-political and personal domains where skilled migrants negotiate this legal status with their interactions with others in the surrounding world. Exploring this negotiation requires us to look into the ways skilled migrants make sense of their familiarity with sharing their everyday lives with others. Heidegger's (1962) concept of (un)familiarity with being-in-the-world with others and things can be used to explore this negotiation.

### **3. Methodology**

We live in the world with familiarity in the way we go about our business and make sense of our lives as "being-in" (Blattner, 2006, p. 43). "Being-in" means our involvement with the world where we know "[our] way about in [the] public environment" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 405). In this manner, "being-at-home" sustains a "taken-for-granted involvement" between us and the world (p. 233). We "flee into the 'at-home' of publicness" (p. 234).

However, when we encounter new things, or things are broken, we find them "strange or different" (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2015, p. 1452). An uneasy feeling may appear when we are placed in an unfamiliar situation or locale with unknown people. We "flee in the face of uncanniness" or being "not-at-home" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 234). In the case of migration, for example, migrants may face the feeling of loneliness or strangeness in the new place (Robertson, 2008; Zachariah, Mathew, & Rajan, 2001). Even in the same locale interacting with the same people, they sometimes face an uneasy feeling, as they need to act in ways they cannot predict or plan. Urged by the need to be grounded in a place with familiarity, we may either pursue things in our own way or fall into "going along with what

everyone else is doing” (Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2015, p. 1453). Being at-home and not-at-home shows our absorption in the world in the way we live our lives in relation to others and things in the world.

This theoretical framing allows the researcher to examine how 5 participants: Yen Xuan, Tuong Vu, Thai Duong, Xuan Hong, and Minh Thanh (pseudonyms) obtained dual citizenships and made sense of their belonging between the two societies. These 5 participants were selected among a sample of 15 participants in the researcher’s larger project conducted in Australia. All of the participants were recruited through a purposive sampling technique. They were Vietnamese two-step migrants who had studied for a degree at an Australian university and obtained Australian citizenship before 2015.

These participants were interviewed with a certain set of questions related to their migration. Some of their stories emerged the themes of citizenship belonging that were selected for this article. Their accounts about these themes were examined against the interrelated notions of citizenship, identity, ethnicity, and transnational ties in relation to the ways they managed their being-at-home and not-at-home as familiarity and unfamiliarity.

#### **4. Multiple meanings of citizenship and belonging**

##### *Australian citizenship as a social status marker in Vietnam*

These 5 participants’ aspirations for future work and life were connected to the ways they interpreted the use of dual citizenships with particular regards to transnational mobilities. Australian citizens have been allowed to apply for dual and multiple citizenships since April 2002. For example, as influenced by his parents’ expectations of social status earned by his relocation to Australia, Tuong Vu understood that his Australian citizenship was firstly manifest as a social status marker in Vietnam. While it was a legal evidence of his permanent residency in Australia, he expected to frequently return to Vietnam for transnational businesses with his Vietnamese citizenship. He applied to retain his Vietnamese citizenship to ease visa paperwork. His understanding of dual citizenships was given an extra meaning of temporary return for entrepreneurial purposes and cultural connections. His dual citizenships could also guarantee equal rights of work and residency in both societies. His understanding of his dual citizenships was enabled through the ways he was immersed in the *social milieu* with others. His interactions with others through the realization of the ambiguous meanings of the citizenships opened up new possibilities for him to become.

Similar to what Robertson (2008, p. 203) has confirmed with skilled migrants’ understanding of their Australian citizenships as a security of legal residency in Australia, his legal status of his Australian citizenship was manifest itself as a functional means for him to enhance the acquisition of social status across borders, and a subjective marker of identity.

Similarly, Xuan Hong considered her dual citizenships was explainable in terms of the “reward” she wanted to offer her parents living in Vietnam:

*My parents have always wanted me to have the Australian citizenship. I now have it. It’s a reward for their great investment in my education [laughing]. They never tell how they are pleased with my Australian citizenship, but I know for sure that they are very happy and so proud that they have a daughter living legally in Australia as a citizen!*

Her Australian citizenship presented itself as a legal status which brought social status to her parents. While some of the other participants in the researcher's project perceived the acquisition of the Australian citizenship as to guarantee their escape from Vietnam, Tuong Vu and Xuan Hong considered it as a return to their parents' investment in their international education for social status. Their different personal histories influenced their present ways of being and future aspirations in different ways. Such a thing as the Australian passport which was perceived as *equipment* to achieve their legal status was manifest itself in different meanings to them. In Tuong Vu and Xuan Hong's cases, their Australian citizenship was also the representation of how they attempted to maintain their filial piety with their parents in Vietnam.

Tuong Vu's transnationally arranged marriage exemplified how he got involved in the world with his parents. When asked how he would sustain the position as both a Vietnamese and Australian person after marriage, he responded:

*Whether we [he and his fiancée] will live in Vietnam or in Australia permanently is another issue that we have discussed for long. For us, it is necessary for her to apply for citizenship in Australia because I have already held the Australian citizenship. We are not going to lose anything, but going to gain an extra citizenship.*

Tuong Vu's understanding of the Australian citizenship became instrumental in the sense that he could utilize it as *equipment*. Although his intention to return to Vietnam for permanent residency was rejected by his father because he had already invested "labour and money" for the "brand" of *Viet kieu* (Vietnamese expatriates). Thai Duong similarly encountered the issue of using this "brand" for his occasional returns. The benefits that this "brand" brought to him were not clearly named. Thai Duong commented:

*Whenever I get back and hang around with my new and old friends, I am treated differently. They always listen to my stories, no matter how true they are... It seems that I get some respect. I don't really know where this respect comes from. It could come from my education in Australia, but I am doubtful because some of my friends have also studied in Australia, Singapore, the US, or the UK. It probably comes from my Australian nationality.*

His Australian citizenship also brought him public respect. The image of *Viet kieu* has emerged as a social fashion. They are seen as those who contribute money and ideas to the nation's development. In 2011 alone, Vietnam received a total amount of \$9 billion from international remittances generated by both Vietnamese refugees and migrants, accounting for 8% of its GDP (DIAC, 2012, p. 1). The researcher still remembers that when he was young, people had to conceal the illegal cross-border movement of their relatives or friends. Even in public areas or gatherings, people chose not to talk about these people for fear of being related to these traitors. Imprisonment in new economic zones was the Government's punishment for those who attempted to escape, and those who attempted to hide and protect these traitors. However, since the researcher grew up in the 1990s, he has seen a lot of "rituals" (Biao, 2011, p. 821) that the Vietnamese Government has embodied in diasporic strategies. The image of *Viet kieu* has carried the newly added symbolic meaning which is often translated into materialistic values such as remittances and gifts (Yeoh *et al.*, 2013). While this image transformation may sometimes cause trouble to *Viet kieu* returning to Vietnam for a visit when they are supposed to bring

dollars and exotic gifts to relatives and friends, it has created a new public respect for *Viet kieu* as those who can make material changes to the families and communities.

Tuong Vu and Thai Duong's social marker *Viet kieu* was interpreted in the newly created culture of respect for Vietnamese expatriates, which was related to their parents' expectation of social status. This identity marker enabled them to actualize frequent temporary returns to Vietnam for transnational businesses and relationships.

*Dual citizenships as a desire for transnational entrepreneurship*

Tuong Vu considered his dual citizenships as complimentary to each other: Vietnamese citizenship for ease of cross-border mobility, and Australian citizenship for social status in entrepreneurial activities in Vietnam. First, by retaining the Vietnamese citizenship, Tuong Vu expected not to have to apply for a visa to Vietnam:

*The good thing with the Vietnamese passport is that I don't have to apply for a visa. Whenever I have money and I want to go, I just go without having to wait for any time.*

In the same vein, the visa exemption brought by the Vietnamese passport was expected to ease Minh Thanh's desire for frequent travels to Vietnam:

*I have often returned and will do it more frequently in the future... My younger sister is going to university and will get married a few years later. Then my parents will live alone... The Vietnamese passport is useful, hey?*

The rationale of his future frequent returns was framed within the culture of filial piety and responsibilities. His Vietnamese passport became "useful" in the sense that it could ease his expected mobilities for fulfilling these responsibilities and cultural norms. entrepreneurial purposes. These activities were found to link to the Australian citizenship in the ways that the latter could further enhance social status. For example, Tuong Vu said:

*My dad keeps telling me about the importance of having connections in Vietnam without which you may die soon! He has to extend his connections to other people, from cosmetics dealers to tax officers, public security officers, directors of health sectors, and even gangsters at the market. They all influence the security of our business if we don't pay them money! But that's OK. They are our ways of doing business, a kind of grease which makes our business run better. I don't think I can learn these rules quickly, but I will have to learn from my parents... They have told me that with the Australian passport, I can go through this system quite easily.*

This quote implied several points of concern regarding his future mobilities. First, the possibility of his return was foreseen with the challenge of social and political connections, even with "gangsters at the market" that he might face like his father. He seemed to be familiar with bribery and social connections to those with power as a "kind of grease" which smoothed his parents' business. He encountered political patronage as a social practice and social norm that Vietnamese people tended to conform to. Embedded in his future business activities was the importance of social status in the form of public respect associated with his Australian citizenship. While he initially mentioned the symbolic meaning of the Australian citizenship in Vietnam, he was able to realize the potential practicality of this identity marker for enriching social and political connections. His future use of the dual

citizenships blurred the notion of permanency and temporariness in mobilities. In quite a similar vein, although Yen Xuan's returns were not actualized, she was planning it through her experiences of relocation to Australia.

*I think with my two citizenships, I can live in Vietnam for a while and come back here to live for a while, as a "half-time" citizen. You know what I mean? Kind of living in between the two countries.*

Her social positioning as a "half-time citizen" through transnational mobilities indicated a contradiction between "permanent" and "residency". Her future "residency" was negotiated as temporary in the home and host societies, as possibilities might keep opening up through her relationships with her parents and old friends. She negotiated the meanings of her dual citizenships to make sense of identity and nationhood. This interaction led to the construction of a transnational social field where the notion of nationhood could be changed from a fixed ideology to a fluid concept.

Similar to what Robertson (2008, pp. 210-211 & pp. 233-235) has found with some skilled migrants' negotiation of citizenships in Australia, these participants' understanding of Australian citizenship was an expression of their desire for ease of temporary return to Vietnam and rights to permanent residency in Australia. It showed their efforts to naturalize or become familiar with the new life in Australia. Citizenship as *equipment*, in this sense, referred to both the primary function of legal residency status and sense of transnational belonging. Embedded in the understanding of citizenship and belonging was the presentation of cross-border spatiality. Unlike what Waters (2003) and Batrouney and Goldlust (2005) have revealed about the relation between migrants' naturalization and sense of attachment to the host society, their legal attachment to Australia did not equally mean complete naturalization. They added the meaning of intergenerational security to the *equipment* of Australian citizenship. Their understanding of citizenship, therefore, was just more than the representation of legal status. It was manifest as "values and obligations" (Lucas & Purkayastha, 2007, p. 243) towards their parents and communal practice for social status in Vietnam. In this sense, space is not experienced as a "vacuum", but rather "a web of cross-cutting power relations" which are formed at "multiple scales from the local to the global" (Secor, 2002, p. 7). They experienced power relations through a range of scales by assigning particular meanings to space with social norms.

#### *Ethnicity that enhances belonging*

Xuan Hong and Yen Xuan identified themselves as "Vietnamese from blood" (Xuan Hong's words) through their biological and emotional ties to Vietnam. Yen Xuan commented that she was "forever Vietnamese" because her "blood [was] Vietnamese". By recognizing that she was Vietnamese, her Australian passport was seen as a piece of legal evidence and permission for her to live in Australia. Yen Xuan said:

*The citizenship and passport are the citizenship and passport themselves. They are just papers... But they are not your Vietnamese blood...*

In other words, her "body" was in Australia, but her "soul" was in Vietnam. Her attachment to both societies, once again, inferred that she was not rootless. Generally speaking, not all skilled migrants can afford to be rootless due to a number of economic, political, social, ethnic and cultural reasons (Tseng, 2011, p. 765). In her case, ethnicity mattered to her future aspiration of a temporary return.

The farness or nearness of Vietnam and Australia was not experienced in terms of physical distance, but spatiality made sense through her practical involvement with *equipment* in the world (Heidegger, 1962, p. 135). Spaces in relation to her involvement in Australian and Vietnamese societies, in this sense, carried “referential functionality” (Arisaka, 1996, p. 458). The functionality of space was referred in this way: Australia was perceived as a place to maintain her life and bring up her child for future cosmopolitan mobilities, and Vietnam was as a place to maintain her sense of belonging.

These accounts suggest that the ways they perceived their identities went beyond the dichotomies of new identities formed in the host country for incorporation and old identities as being attached to the home society. Their hybrid identities challenged the notion of fixed and static national belonging through their immersion into place. This immersion included both imaginative attachment to the homeland and incorporation in the receiving society.

In a Heideggerian perspective, the multiple meanings of dual citizenships provide some implications for understanding of transnational mobilities. First, the legal status of residency is perceived as necessary *equipment* for skilled migrants to navigate in the host society, while their sense of membership can be used as another piece of *equipment* which enables them to navigate their transnational mobilities in certain places. The *equipment* of citizenship only makes sense in relation to the *equipment* of belonging. The ways skilled migrants use the concert of *equipment*, on the one hand, depend on their acculturation and transnational practices that are impacted by the broader socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts. On the other, their sense-making of citizenship and belonging produce new forms of subjectivities in interactions with the broader social structures. Underpinning their transnational practices of citizenships and belonging is their interpretation of spatiality. Their understanding of spatiality is not solely or simply based on geographical distances, though they matter in terms of financing cross-border trips and some transnational activities. Spatiality is experienced through skilled migrants’ interactions with those who matter to them.

Skilled migrants’ interpretation of Australian citizenship demonstrates their social positioning as an Australian citizen without claiming that they entirely belong to Australia. Their Australian citizenship is symbolic because of its material benefits that might enhance them to sustain the social status, prospect of entrepreneurship in Vietnam and secure intergenerational goods.

## 5. Conclusion

These skilled migrants’ transnational emotional and corporeal ties to Vietnam did not weaken their integration in Australia. Some previous research has pointed out that increasing transnational practices would decrease levels of assimilation and incorporation in the host society (e.g. Smith, 2003; Vertovec, 2009). Their everyday lives seemed to become transnational rather than being located at the local level, and their immigration and incorporation in Australia became “interrelated” (Kivisto, 2003, p. 19). The ways they constructed their double identities were related to the ways they made sense of space in terms of their new and old homes with a certain degree of feeling at-home or familiarity.

These participants had arrived in Australia physically, but to some extent, their actual ideas of relocation to Australia were less about physical settlement (see also Baas, 2010). Instead, after arrival, they seemed to forge new imaginaries of connecting to the homeland. This finding shows that skilled migrants’ imaginaries of national identity sustainment are constructed through their transnational



business activities, occasional visits, marriage, and frequent communication. Such imaginaries are closely linked to their sense-making of space, in which their activities for emotional and identity connections are directed towards the actions they do in relation to other immobile people in the home society. Their imagination of such space as the homeland is shaped by their *being-in* Australia.

Mutually exclusive notions of local and transnational ties, as well as citizenships and belonging enable us to think beyond such dichotomies, as these migrants forged their belonging and multiple attachments to multiple places between home and host societies. According to Ehrkamp (2005), identities should be understood in relation to changing situations and contexts where migrants dwell. Places are not seen as containers that serve as “platforms” (Ehrkamp, 2005, p. 349) for migrants to construct their identities. Instead, places are produced and reproduced through social processes at different scales in interactions with people and things. Identities are produced and reproduced in close relation to the social production of place. In this sense, it is the diaspora who can create the notion of the homeland (see also Axel, 2002).

### **Compliance of research and publication ethics**

I, as the Corresponding Author, declare and undertake that in the study titled as “Skilled migrants’ negotiations of citizenship and belonging”, scientific, ethical and citation rules were followed; Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry Journal Editorial Board has no responsibility for all ethical violations to be encountered, that all responsibility belongs to the author/s and that this study has not been sent to any other academic publication platform for evaluation.

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