

NEW MOBILITIES IN ASIA



Lan Anh Hoang

Vietnamese Migrants in Russia

Mobility in Times of Uncertainty

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Vietnamese Migrants in Russia



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New Mobilities in Asia

In the 21st century, human mobility will increasingly have an Asian face. Migration from, to, and within Asia is not new, but it is undergoing profound transformations. Unskilled labour migration from the Philippines, China, India, Burma, Indonesia, and Central Asia to the West, the Gulf, Russia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand continues apace. Yet industrialization in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India, the opening of Burma, and urbanization in China is creating massive new flows of internal migration. China is fast becoming a magnet for international migration from Asia and beyond.

Meanwhile, Asian students top study-abroad charts; Chinese and Indian managers and technicians are becoming a new mobile global elite as foreign investment from those countries grows; and Asian tourists are fast becoming the biggest travellers and the biggest spenders, both in their own countries and abroad.

These new mobilities reflect profound transformations of Asian societies and their relationship to the world, impacting national identities and creating new migration policy regimes, modes of transnational politics, consumption practices, and ideas of modernity. This series brings together studies by historians, anthropologists, geographers, and political scientists that systematically explore these changes.

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Cover illustration: Sortavala train station, Karelia, August 2019

Photo: Phạm Hồng Long

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 621 4

e-ISBN 978 90 4854 463 9 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789463726214

NUR 740

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*In loving memory of my parents
who taught me to dream*



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Acknowledgements

As I was writing the concluding sentences of this book manuscript, news broke about what later came to be known as the ‘Essex 39,’ sending shock waves around the world. On 23 October 2019, the bodies of 39 Vietnamese migrants – 31 men and 8 women – were discovered in the trailer of a refrigerated lorry in Essex, United Kingdom. Ten of those who lost their lives in search of a better life were teenagers, the youngest of whom was only 15 years old. The devastating loss of human life sparked outpouring of grief and sorrow in both the UK and Vietnam, prompting the Vietnamese government to launch a probe on the case and leading to calls for the UK government to rethink its restrictive immigration and border regime.

The tragic incident hit my Vietnamese research participants in Moscow particularly hard because it felt so close to home. As it turned out, many of the victims had passed through Russia en route to the UK – the most common people smuggling route from Vietnam to Western Europe. Their fatal journey was a poignant reminder of the precarious life that my research participants were leading in Moscow. Although the risks and dangers they faced on a daily basis were not as deadly, the sacrifices that they had to make were tremendous. I am deeply grateful to my research participants for trusting me and sharing with me the stories that otherwise might not have had a voice. Some of them might not agree with my findings but I hope they will feel that the book has done justice to their courage and resilience and provided an honest depiction of the trials and tribulations they have gone through as an irregular migrant in post-Soviet Russia. My greatest debt is to Quang, Tâm Anh, anh Hưng, Thuỷ, Văn, anh Phát, Long, chị Phượng, Thịnh, Vân, chị Hà, and chị Hồng without whose generosity and kindness this book would not have been possible.

Many people have guided me and inspired me through my academic career and motivated me to complete this project. Special thanks go to Brenda Yeoh who supervised, mentored and supported me during my postdoctoral years at Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis, National University of Singapore. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with and learn from her during these formative years. I owe an enormous debt to Hưng Cẩm Thái for telling me to believe in myself and diligently teaching me the ropes. I have drawn extensively on his research on Vietnamese Americans and benefited greatly from his intellectual insights and wisdom. My former PhD supervisors at University of East Anglia – Catherine Locke and Janet Seeley – offered me a model



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of intellectual dedication, integrity, and kindness. I cannot thank them enough for believing in my abilities and teaching me skills that have made me a better researcher. My colleagues at The University of Melbourne Leslie Holmes, Anthony D'Costa and Jens Zinn provided insightful comments on the design of the project and book proposals, for which I am grateful. During the course of writing the book I had the opportunities to co-convene four conference panels with Cheryll Alipio, Minh Nguyễn, and Juan Zhang (Jessie) who offered valuable feedback, encouragement and support. I am indebted to Cheryll Alipio whose dedication and collegiality carried me through the most challenging stages of the project when I was juggling multiple roles at work and at home. This book has benefited from our collaboration on the co-edited volume *Money and moralities in contemporary Asia* which was published by Amsterdam University Press in 2019.

The processes of obtaining a business visa for Russia and finding a local administrative sponsor were daunting but I was fortunate to receive the generous advice and support of Sergei Riazantsev, Lee McAneney, Katya Pechenkina, Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Igor Istomin. I am thankful to Sergei Riazantsev who welcomed me into the Centre of Demography at the Russian Academy of Sciences and introduced me to my fieldwork sponsor – Moscow State Institute of International Relations. His research on foreign migrants in Russia was an important source of information and ideas for the book.

The hard work, dedication, and generosity of many people have made this book possible. I am extremely grateful to Nguyễn Hà Đông for painstakingly transcribing all the recorded interviews for me and Nguyễn Thành Chung for diligently coding my data in NVivo and putting up with my demands which were excessive at times. Many thanks to Brooke Dunnell for proofreading the manuscript and Nguyễn Thanh Tâm for fine-tuning the opening poem. I am indebted to Phạm Hồng Long who kindly provided me with a beautiful cover photo and Đỗ Minh Phương who developed the map of Vietnam and sent it to me at lightning speed.

Many thanks to Saskia Gieling, my editor at Amsterdam University Press, and her production team for their expert advice, professionalism, and patience. Constructive and critical feedback from Pál Nyíri – *New Mobilities in Asia* book series editor – and two anonymous reviewers helped me sharpen my arguments and strengthen the structure of the book, for which I am grateful.

I am thankful for the feedback I received from audience at various international events including the 10th and 11th International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) conferences, the 11th Engaging with Vietnam Conference 2019,



the 2018 Australian Sociological Association conference, the 2017 Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference, the 2016 Asian Studies Association of Australia conference, the 3rd International Conference of the Thematic Group Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty of the International Sociological Association (ISA), and the 2015 Australian Anthropological Society conference. Hy Văn Lương and Melody Lu who served as the discussant for my panels at the 2017 AAS conference and the 11th ICAS conference, respectively, provided important criticisms and suggestions for improving my analysis. The book has also benefited from the lectures I delivered at University College London (UK), University of East Anglia (UK), and RMIT University (Australia).

The project would not have been possible without the generous financial support provided by my home institution – The University of Melbourne and School of Social and Political Sciences. My fieldwork and data processing were financed by various internal grants including a Faculty of Arts research grant, two Special Studies Programs (SSP) grants, and annual research funding from School of Social and Political Sciences. The work behind the publication of this book was also supported by School of Social and Political Sciences. Parts of the conceptualising and writing stages were conducted during my research fellowship at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and sabbatical leave at University of East Anglia, respectively. I am deeply grateful for the advice, encouragement and ideas I received from Lai Ah-Eng, Theodora Lam, Melody Lu, Lucy Porter-Jordan, Laura Camfield, Nitya Rao, Peter Lloyd-Sherlock, Cecile Jackson, and Maria Abranches during these visits.

I am indebted to many people who have enriched my life and nourished my soul. I especially thank Lý, Bình, Cúc, Thái Anh, Linh, Hồ Huyền, Tùng, Thái, Phương Anh, Phượng, Quỳnh Hà, Khánh Vân, Xoan, Thảo, and Tú for their love and unflagging support. Writing this book has been a lonely journey at times and I could not have completed it without their friendship and companionship. I learned something new every time I talked with Marla Asis, Phan Lê Hà, Trần An Huy, Trần Thanh Giang, Nguyễn Hà Phương, Shu-yi Pearl Wang, Roy Huijsmans, Nana Oishi, and Catherine Gomes. At the University of Melbourne, I was fortunate to have the support and guidance of my colleagues on a daily basis. Thanks to Bina Fernandez, Tammy Kohn, Monica Minnegal, Karen Farquharson, Adrian Little, Dan Woodman, Vicki Schubert, Paul Green, Nadeem Malik, Anne Decobert, Andy Dawson, John Langmore, Kalissa Alexeyeff, Rachael Diprose, Erin Fitz-Henry, Ghassan Hage, Dolly Kikon, Jonathan Goodhand, and Michael Herzfeld for providing an intellectually stimulating and collegial environment which has enabled me to complete this book.



My second child – Anh-Vũ – was born during the final stage of writing this book and together with his sister – Linh – has kept my spirits up by filling my days with laughter and joy. I am indebted to Chung and Linh for tolerating my physical and mental absences and tirelessly supporting me in the pursuit of my dreams.

Writing this book has been a great pleasure, a labor of love. My family history is intimately linked to the history of Vietnamese migration to Soviet Union and, later, Russia. My father studied physics at Leningrad State University (now Saint Petersburg State University) during the 1960s and returned to Soviet Union in 1982 to work as the manager of a construction brigade. He came home briefly in the mid-1980s to care for my terminally ill mother and went back to work in Russia upon her death. He did not return to Vietnam for good until the fall of the Soviet Union. I remember vividly the thrill of opening the letters and pinewood gift boxes he sent all the way from far far away Russia and the enthrallment with his riveting tales of the exotic people and places he had visited.

My father's love for Russian language and culture was infectious. I voraciously read anything about Russia that I could lay my hands on and spent any time I had refining my Russian language skills, hoping that one day I could follow in my father's footsteps and travel to Russia to study and work. Sadly, my childhood dreams were shattered by the collapse of the Soviet Union and, with it, the cancellation of bilateral agreements with Vietnam on educational exchange and contract labor migration. As I was reluctantly steering my life in a different direction, my older sister began her own Russia story by joining her husband in Moscow. She remains there with her family to this day. In writing this book, I give a nod to my childhood dreams and pay tribute to my father, sister, and my fellow countrymen who had the courage to pursue their Russian dream and the strength to persevere through extreme adversities.

Lan Anh Hoang
March 2020



Tặng Một Người Bạn (For a Friend)

Author unknown¹

Tôi và anh sang cùng một chuyến bay	We came here on the same flight
Xa quê hương đi kiếm tiền xứ lạ	Leaving the homeland to work in a foreign land
Kiếp tha phương mỗi người một ngã	Leading a nomadic life, we parted ways
Giờ gặp nhau cùng dãy chợ Chim	Our paths crossed again at the Birds' market ² one day
Cũng áo quần, bán lẻ bán buôn	Both selling clothes on the same lane, retail and wholesale
Cũng đồng thuê, còng lưng cho chủ nợ	Working from dusk to dawn, yet never earning enough
Lại còn phit, công an, thuê nhà ở ...	To satiate loan sharks, market bosses, police, and landlord
Suốt ngày cày, lờ lãi chẳng thấy đầu	Toiling day in day out, still empty-handed
Hết nắng mưa, bão tuyết dải dẫu	Rain or shine, snowstorm and ice
Đến cũi sắt, phòng giam trong đồn quận	Chains and shackles in the detention center
Nhiều khi uất chí cúi đầu nuốt hận	All we can do is to swallow our pride and anger
Sống đất người ta, đầu phải ở quê mình	What can we do? It's somebody else's land
Qua nhà này phố nọ sống lênh đênh	We drift from one place to another
Ồ vi bắt, công an khu vực đuổi	Forever running and hiding
Trộm cướp rình mò, khách hàng giả dối	Harassed by police, terrorized by robbers, cheated by customers
Lúc tưởng lời thì lại lỗ vì xanh	When things start to look up, the green ³ goes down
Làm ở xứ người cực nhọc bấp bênh	Life is nothing but hard work and uncertainty in this foreign land
Giá đồng rúp nổi chìm theo hối đoái	The rouble keeps rising and falling
Được ít nào lại nợ nần trang trải	Every dollar earned goes to debt payment
Biết bao giờ dành dụm đủ để về?	When can we save enough money to return to the homeland?
Đứa cùng phòng làm cứu vãn vắc thuê	A room-mate who works as a market porter
Đau gân cốt bỏ ăn nằm rên rĩ	Is in so much pain, skipping meals, wailing in bed
Gia tài ở nhà: cha mẹ yếu	The only treasure is left at home: ailing parents
Vẫn sớm chiều mong đợi đứa con xa	Languishing in the pain of separation from their dear children

1 The poem by an anonymous author was circulated on the Facebook page *Người Việt tại Nga* (Vietnamese people in Russia) in 2016.

2 Birds' market (*Chợ Chim*) is commonly used by Vietnamese migrants to refer to Sadovod market (*Садовод рынок*) – my main fieldwork site – due to its adjacency to a birds' market (*Птичий рынок*).

3 'The green' is a slang term commonly used among Vietnamese migrants to refer to the US dollar.





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I Introduction

The Market

It was a crisp, chilly Friday morning in early April 2014 when I stepped out of the main door of a fifteen-story apartment block in Kotelniki – a working-class suburb 25 kilometers southeast of Moscow’s city center – and headed for the nearby minibus stop to commence my second fieldwork stint in Russia. Having arrived in Moscow from scorching Singapore less than 24 hours before, I was dazed and momentarily disoriented by the biting northerly wind. It was 8.00am and I was already late for my first day at Sadovod market. My Vietnamese host, Trang,⁴ had left hours ago with her husband – their work day at the market began between 4.30 and 5.00am. Thirty roubles⁵ and ten minutes later, I found myself strolling along СТ7 – the first *linia* (линия, ‘lane’) behind the northern gates facing Verkhniye Polya Road (Верхние Поля Улицы) – towards Trang’s *công* (‘store’),⁶ where I would be based for the next three months. Friday tended to be the quietest day of the week at Sadovod, as much of the retail activity happened at the weekend when long-distance wholesale customers had come and left, but

4 All names in this book have been changed to protect research participants’ privacy.

5 The exchange rate was RUB 30=USD 1 at the time of my first fieldwork trip in May-June 2013 and RUB 36=USD 1 in April-June 2014. The value of the Russian rouble dropped sharply toward the end of 2014 due to economic sanctions following the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine, slumping to RUB 80=1 USD in mid-December 2014 before gradually recovering over the following two years. At the time of my third fieldwork trip in November 2016, the exchange rate was RUB 65=USD 1. Because of the wide variations in the exchange rate over the period from 2013 to 2016, I convert the Russian rouble to US dollars each time money is mentioned in the book according to the approximate exchange rate at that period of time.

6 *Công* is the short version of *công ten nơ* – the Vietnamese equivalent of ‘cargo shipping container’ – which is used by Vietnamese traders to refer to their stores at Russian markets. The first markets that sprung up spontaneously in post-Communist Russia in the early 90s were open-air sites such as the Luzhnyky market (Лужники рынок), where sale spots were claimed on a first-come-first-served basis. From the late 1990s to the late 2000s, trade was gradually moved into former student hostels and factory accommodation (such as the famous Saliut 2 [Салют 2] and Saliut 3 [Салют 3] in northern Moscow) and makeshift markets made up of old cargo shipping containers, hence the use of the term *công* to refer to market stores. The closure of *Chợ Vòm* (Cherkizovsky market) – an infamous, expansive open-air market near Cherkizovsky metro station – in 2008 signaled the end of the shipping container-market model that was deemed incompatible with the modern and cosmopolitan Moscow. Although most markets in Moscow or at least large sections of them nowadays are securely built with wood, corrugated sheet metal, and/or steel and concrete, the term *công* is still widely used by the Vietnamese to refer to market stores.



as I soon learned, the rest of the week was not much different during the economic downturn of 2014. The market was almost empty save for clusters of Kyrgyz, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese traders and shop assistants huddling together around the edges and at the hot beverage carts scattered idly along the *linias*. With staggering rental rates, ranging from RUB 330,000 to 600,000 (USD 10,000-18,000) per month for a 20-square-meter *công* as of April 2014, an empty market was a depressing sight. Each day an average *công* needed to generate at least USD 700 to cover running costs, including *công* rental, accommodation, food, and hired labor. Yet I was intrigued by market traders' calm acceptance of the situation – their life in Russia had been anything but uneventful or predictable. Uncertainty had become their way of life over more than two tumultuous decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The period from 2013 to 2014 was a particularly difficult time for Vietnamese migrants in Russia. In late July 2013, the killing of a young Russian man by an Azeri migrant at Western Moscow's Matveevsky grocery market (*Матвеевский рынок*) led to mass arrests of migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia and prompted unprecedented large-scale raids on migrant enclaves on the outskirts of the city. On 31 July 2013, 1,200 Vietnamese workers were arrested at 20 different illegal garment factories across Moscow and sent to a makeshift detention center in the east of the city to await deportation. The government's aggressive anti-immigration campaign went on for months, during which construction sites, warehouses, factories, hostels, migrant residential areas, and public transport were subjected to regular raids, and markets were closed. Sadovod – one of two markets in Moscow with large concentrations of Vietnamese traders – was first raided on 7 August 2013 and 1,185 foreign nationals were arrested. From then until the end of the year, the market and affiliate migrant dormitories were raided on a regular basis, throwing market traders' lives into disarray. The distressing situation took a turn for the worse in early 2014 when the armed conflict in Ukraine erupted, prompting the West to impose a range of economic sanctions on Russia. To compound the situation, a major fire broke out in the middle of Sadovod market in the early days of 2014, destroying scores of *côngs* along *linia 27* together with all the merchandise and cash stocked inside of them. It is common for Vietnamese traders to leave their cash in the *công* at the end of the day due to their fear of robbery and police extortion on the way home. Although the affected traders eventually managed to claim some form of compensation from the market owners (a waiver of two months' rent and RUB 300,000), the amount was only a fraction of what they had lost. As the economic crisis deepened, they were dealt another serious blow



toward the end of 2014 when the Russian rouble crashed, hitting its record low of RUB 80 to USD 1 in mid-December and losing more than half of its value within a few months. Inflated living costs due to economic sanctions went hand in hand with stagnant market trade, deepening the distress and anxiety that could be felt across the market.

Despite the economic stagnation and the government's radical crackdown on irregular migrants, it remained business as usual for Vietnamese migrants. The disruptions had neither led to an exodus from Russia nor discouraged new arrivals. Everyone I met at the market in 2014 was convinced that the situation would soon change for the better, as had always happened in the past. They were, indeed, no strangers to crisis. The history of Vietnamese migration to and survival in post-Soviet Russia is characterized by the cyclical boom and bust of the markets where the vast majority of them earn a living. In the riveting life histories narrated to me by my research participants, major milestones in their migrant lives are signposted by momentous turning points at the marketplace. Vietnamese engagement in market trade started with the illicit 'suitcase' trade in the early 1980s, when students and guest workers smuggled Chinese or Japanese merchandise as travel luggage from Vietnam into the Soviet Union's closed economy and shipped highly-valued Soviet-made products back home (Dang & Beresford, 2000, p. 90; Schwenkel, 2014, p. 236). These activities continued in a discreet and ad hoc manner until the mid-1990s, when profit making was no longer considered illegal (see also Sik & Wallace, 1999, p. 697). As well as Vietnam and China, traders began to source merchandise from new markets including Poland and Turkey, and moved their businesses from streets, metro stations, and stadiums into residential quarters referred to as *dôm* (дом – residential block) and *ôp* (общежитие – student hostels). Cramped studio flats in these *dôm*s and *ôp*s, each with access to communal bathrooms and kitchens, served as both living quarters and wholesale stores supplying cheap clothes and shoes to petty traders from all over Russia. As of late 2001, the heyday of the Vietnamese 'apartment trade', an estimated sixteen commercial-cum-residential *dôm*s and *ôp*s were in operation across Moscow. Most of them were under the control of two Vietnamese companies, *Sông Hồng* (Red River) and *Bến Thành*,⁷ which leased abandoned buildings and dormitories from local factories or colleges and rented out the units to Vietnamese traders. Capitalizing on the so-called 'institutional void', where the state's role in the regulation of trade and commerce shrank quickly but substitute institutions had not been set up (Elster, Offe, & Preuss, 1998), this

7 *Bến Thành* is the name of the largest market in Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam.



form of trade flourished and many traders became millionaires overnight. The 'golden age' of unregulated trade and commerce was a common feature of European post-socialist economies in the 1990s when 'one could sell anything and turn a profit' (Pieke, Nyíri, Thuno, & Ceccagno, 2004, p. 132).

Between 2002 and 2007, spurred by growing anti-immigration sentiments among the general public and concerns about security, fire hazards, sanitation, and possibly criminal activity, the Moscow government decided to close down the commercial *đôms* and *ốps*, sparking a major social and economic crisis within the Vietnamese community. The heavily crowded *Đôm 5* (Дом 5) and *ốp Saliut 3* (Салют 3) were closed by force, without prior warnings or any form of compensation. Tales of Special Purpose Mobile Unit (OMON)⁸ forces beating up traders, burning and flushing their cash down the toilet, and evicting them from Saliut 3 during the night still haunt my research participants to this day. In the aftermath of this turmoil, many fell into bankruptcy and had no choice but to leave Russia. They had invested their lifetime savings in these commercial *đôms* and *ốps*, but did not receive any compensation from the government. While some traders rented rooms from the managing company, others had paid around USD 15,000-20,000 for the use rights of each flat they were using or renting out. The debts owed by provincial *sukhoy*⁹ wholesale customers were irrecoverable because they could not be tracked down.

The closure of *đôms* and *ốps* marked the end of Vietnamese domination of the wholesale trade in footwear and clothing, as they had to relocate to multi-ethnic markets where recently arrived Chinese traders were quickly establishing themselves at the top of the game. Most ended up in *Chợ Vòm* (known to Muscovites as Cherkizovsky market due to its proximity to a metro station with the same name), which was then Eastern Europe's biggest trading ground, controlled by the conglomerate Ast Group. The Ast

8 OMON – *Отряд мобильный особого назначения* (Special Purpose Mobile Unit) – is a special police force created during the Soviet era (1988) that played a critical role in the armed conflicts following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nowadays, OMON are used as riot police or combatants in troubled areas including Chechnya. OMON forces are occasionally deployed in government campaigns to crack down on irregular migrants in Moscow and particularly feared for their blunt use of force and uncompromising approach toward migrants.

9 *Sukhoy* (сухой) literally means 'dry'. *Sukhoy* sale (buy now, pay later) was a common wholesale practice in the unregulated market trade in Russia in 1990s-2000s. Interprovincial wholesale customers were allowed to take merchandise on account and pay the debts in installments or at the end of the season when they had sold all the wares. This was a high risk practice that was purely based on trust. Interprovincial wholesale customers came from as far as the Russian Far East (e.g. Vladivostok) and the only contact detail they left with Moscow traders was a telephone number. It would be nearly impossible to recover the debt if *sukhoy* customers decided to dodge debt payment.

Group belonged to multimillionaire Telman Ismailov, an Azeri-born Jewish businessman with strong connections to political elites.¹⁰ In a deal typical of post-socialist ‘wild capitalism’¹¹ (see Hankiss, 1990; Harper, 2005; Upchurch & Marinković, 2010), Ast Group paid the Moscow government (or, more precisely, the Federal Sports University) a pittance to rent the land, then partitioned and sublet it to traders at exorbitant rates. *Chợ Vòm*, which had been in operation since 1995, was dominated by Chinese, Azeri, and Turkish merchants. With traders engaged in both wholesale and retail activities, the market was the main supplier of consumer goods in the country. Vietnamese traders initially struggled to compete with capital-rich and well-networked Chinese traders, who had direct access to cheap imports from China. Chinese migrants tended to come from regions with a centuries-long culture of migration and be endowed with superior social and cultural capital that allowed them to acquire low-cost merchandise from factories in China and access the sources of information, capital, and opportunities vital to their entrepreneurial success (see Pieke, 1998, p. 7; Pieke et al., 2004, p. 131). Many were well-educated city dwellers from northern China, with strong connections to state enterprises and trading networks that facilitated their importation of consumer goods to undersupplied economies in Eastern Europe (see Pieke, 1998, pp. 7-8). Furthermore, transnational migration was new to the Vietnamese, who were predominantly from rural backgrounds and lacked the broader business knowledge and strong networks that were critical to the success of their Chinese rivals (Williams & Balaz, 2005, p. 542).

Nevertheless, many Vietnamese traders thrived during *Chợ Vòm*’s ‘golden’ years, between 2005 and 2009. The remarkable prosperity of the market in the 2000s was fueled by the energy-driven economic boom that increased Russians’ disposable incomes sevenfold within the first decade of the millennium (KPMG, 2013, p. 9). The massive boost this gave to consumers’ confidence and household spending was nevertheless at odds with the sluggishness of Russian light industry. Together with their Chinese peers,

10 Telman Ismailov was said to be a close friend of Yury Luzhkov, who served as Moscow’s mayor from 1992 to 2010.

11 ‘Wild capitalism’ broadly refers to blind trust in the free market ideology and the failure to appreciate the dangers of underregulation in post-socialist Europe that has caused widespread corruption, economic failure, social misery, and ecological destruction. In this ‘unfettered capitalism,’ political elites seize the chance to become new economic elites through forming interest groups and ‘an orgy of personal asset accumulation and insider dealing as privatisation of state assets gathered pace’ (Upchurch and Marinković 2010, p. 4). The weak or non-existent business ethics, gangsterism, and corruption are a barrier to outsider and institutional investors seeking a safe home for their investment.



Vietnamese traders successfully capitalized on the consumerist fever in a rapidly stratifying Russian society – they supplied affordable, low-quality, and often counterfeit garments and footwear to the lower-middle and working classes who had acquired a taste for foreign consumer goods, yet were severely constrained by a paltry budget. In the early years of post-Soviet Russia, the nascent retail sector was a sharply bifurcated system, with exclusive boutiques and shopping malls catering to the *nouveau riche's* thirst for luxurious brand names on the one hand, and markets providing less affluent consumers with cheap imports on the other. While generally of low quality, market merchandise is diverse in style and material, appealing to large segments of the Russian population.

The growth of *Chợ Vòm* and the bad reputation it came to acquire, due to criminal activities, money laundering, and sanitation failings, soon alarmed the federal government.¹² In 2007, the Russian government instituted a ban against foreigners trading in markets. While the ban was lifted shortly after that, it foreboded more radical actions by the government. In September 2008, the police raided the market and confiscated 6,000 containers of purportedly counterfeit and contraband goods from China, worth USD 2 billion in total – the biggest haul of contraband in Russia's history.¹³ In June 2009, facing intensifying public vitriol against irregular migration and the shadow economy, the then Mayor of Moscow Yury Luzhkov announced that *Chợ Vòm* would be closed down with immediate effect. My research participants vividly recalled the chaos and distress outside the market when they went to work one morning to find *Chợ Vòm* had been sealed off by police. The Moscow government confiscated all merchandise found at the market, which was estimated to be worth USD 5-8 billion in total (A. Larin, 2012, p. 64).

The repercussions of *Chợ Vòm's* closure were devastating. *Công* use rights cost much more than what migrants had paid for studio rooms in *đôms* and *ôps*, and the scope of their business dealings was also considerably more extensive than before. The extraordinary success of *Chợ Vòm*, and Telman Ismailov's powerful connections, boosted people's confidence in the future of the market and prompted many to invest everything they had. According

12 One of many reasons for the closure of Cherkizovsky market, according to my informants and the Russian media, is that Ismailov had upset the federal government by investing his fortune in Turkey rather than at home. Most notably, he invested USD1.5 billion in the construction of the super luxurious Mardan Palace Hotel in Antalya, Turkey, which opened a month prior to the closure of Cherkizovsky market. It is also believed that the closure of the market was taken as a step toward unseating Yury Luzhkov, who had fallen out of Putin's favor due to accusations of corruption.

13 'Luzhkov, a market and a \$2bln haul.' The Moscow Times, 19 June 2009, <http://old.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/tmt/378889.html>, accessed 13 March 2018.

to the Federation of Migrants in Russia, Cherkizovsky was providing jobs for over 100,000 people at the time of its closure.¹⁴ Many traders lost every last dollar. Disheartened by the successive crises and by a growing sense of vulnerability and helplessness, some decided to leave Russia for good. Yet this did not lead to a significant decline in the Vietnamese population because new migrants kept arriving, and many of the original migrants quickly made their way back.

The closure of *Chợ Vòm* ushered in a new era of market trade in Moscow. Upon their relocation to suburban markets, traders were confronted with a bleak reality when rental rates soared to an unprecedented level, competition within the ever-growing migrant trader population intensified, and the formal retail sector continued to expand rapidly. Vietnamese trade in the post-*Chợ Vòm* era is primarily concentrated in three sturdily constructed and securely guarded multi-ethnic markets (all reputedly belonging to the same men):¹⁵ Sadovod, Liublino,¹⁶ and Yuzhnyie Vorota (a.k.a. Km 19 market).¹⁷ The markets are about 5-10 kilometers away from one another on the southeastern edge of Moscow. There is also a Vietnamese presence, albeit on a much smaller scale, at a market next to Dubrovka station (halfway between Moscow city center and Liublino), a newly constructed market named Lotus at KM 41 on Moscow Automobile Ring Road (MKAD), and a new Vietnamese-owned commercial complex named Incentra in the north of the city. Like *Chợ Vòm*, the markets are operated with rules akin to those of the mafia, which is possible due to the owners' strong connections with powerful individuals in the federal government. Although traders at all the markets engage in both retail and wholesale, they are highly stratified,

14 The Independent, Thursday 16 July 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/oligarch-pays-for-party-that-enraged-putin-1748289.html>, accessed 13 January 2015.

15 The markets are owned by the three Azeri-born billionaire businessmen Zarakh Iliyev, God Nisanov, and Ilkham Ragimov, who was a classmate of Vladimir Putin. According to Forbes, Zarakh Iliyev and God Nisanov also own the Radisson Royal Ukraine Hotel, European Shopping Center, and Radisson SAS Slavyanskaya Hotel in Moscow and many other large properties in Russia (Source: Forbes, <http://www.forbes.com/profile/god-nisanov/>, accessed 8 January 2015). Iliyev and Nisanov were reportedly co-owners of *Chợ Vòm* and are named by Forbes magazine among Russia's 40 richest people with a net worth of USD 3 billion each. Their latest acquisition is the 1.5 million square meter Lotus City, located 14 kilometers southwest of Moscow along the Kaluga highway, which is set to become the largest wholesale market in the Moscow region.

16 The official name of Liublino (*Люблино*) market is Moscow Trade Complex (Торгово-ярмарочный комплекс Москва). It is commonly referred to as Liublino market (or *Chợ Liu* by Vietnamese migrants) due to its proximity to the Liublino metro station

17 Yuzhnyie Vorota (*Южные ворота* – Southern Gates) is often referred to by the Vietnamese as Km 19 market, a name deriving from its geographical location at km 19 on MKAD ring road (Moscow Automobile Ring Road – *Московская Кольцевая Автомобильная Дорога*).

and the extent of one's economic success is largely indicated by the market where they work. At the top of the hierarchy is Liublino, where the monthly rental averages around RUB 600,000-700,000 (USD 17,000-20,000), and where relatively well-established and well-stocked traders have succeeded in developing a stable wholesale customer base. The prohibitive rental rates at Liublino mark it as a highly exclusive space – only the savviest and wealthiest traders can survive there. Yuzhnyie Vorota, where retail predominates and rentals range from RUB 20,000 to RUB 35,000 (USD 570-1,000), is on a lower rung of the ladder, where those who have not 'made it' struggle to scrape a living. In the middle is the largest market, Sadovod, where rental fees, merchandise, and traders' economic circumstances are wide-ranging. The size, diversity, and fluidity of Sadovod were the main reasons I selected it as the main base for my fieldwork. It offered me an ideal space to examine the interrelationships between uncertainty, mobility, and morality within and beyond the Vietnamese community in Moscow.

Vietnamese migration to Russia

The history of Vietnamese migration to Russia is tightly linked to Cold War geopolitics, starting in the mid 1950s when small numbers of students, mostly war orphans and children of communist cadres, were sent to Russia for higher education and vocational training. Student migration picked up gradually in the 1960s and 1970s but significant increases in the Vietnamese population did not happen until the early 1980s, when war-torn and debt-stricken Vietnam began to export labor, first to the former Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and later to other Eastern European countries, to meet its obligations to the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON)¹⁸ (Piper, 2002, p. 9; Williams & Balaz, 2005, p. 536). Vietnamese labor export to Europe peaked in 1989, when 167,503 workers were deployed (Dang, Tacoli, & Hoang, 2003, p. 12). Official records indicate that a total of 217,183 Vietnamese were employed as contract workers in the Eastern European socialist bloc between 1981 and 1990, and 42 percent of them (or 92,000) were female (MOLISA, 1995). Shortly before the Soviet Union's collapse in 1990, about 100,000 Vietnamese

18 COMECON (1949-1991) was an economic organization comprising Eastern European socialist countries and their socialist allies in other parts of the world. Despite its stated aims of economic cooperation and integration, much of COMECON's activities were restricted to economic assistance from wealthier members, especially the Soviet Union, to less developed members such as Vietnam and Cuba.



workers were in Russia (Iontsev, 2005, p. 11). They mostly worked in construction, mechanics, textile and garment production, agriculture, health care, and education (Nguyen, 2009, p. 10). In the context of widespread hunger and poverty in post-war Vietnam, labor migration to Eastern Europe was considered a privilege reserved for people from 'priority' backgrounds, such as family members of war veterans, war martyrs, war invalids, former service members, ethnic minorities, and workers and cadres with excellent work histories (Schwenkel, 2014, p. 43). Because of these criteria, those selected for overseas labor migration were often from poor, rural backgrounds and had no higher education. There was no publicly advertised recruitment system, so people mostly secured their overseas placements through informal social networks and bribes (Bayly, 2004, p. 338).

The collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s caused a sudden halt to labor imports from Vietnam. Political unrest, unemployment, and intensified nationalist sentiments (which at times escalated to xenophobic and racist backlashes), as well as official repatriation programs, drove large numbers of Vietnamese workers home. By the end of 1991, approximately 80 percent of workers had left Eastern Europe (Dang et al., 2003, p.12), although many subsequently made their way back when confronted with the harsh realities of the then struggling Vietnamese economy (see also Schwenkel, 2014, pp. 252, 255). Students and workers who chose to stay formed the backbone of Vietnamese diasporic networks in Eastern Europe that have been continually expanding ever since. New migrants often arrive under student or tourist visas acquired through sophisticated brokerage networks (Molodikova, 2008, p. 28; Soboleva, 2005). Because a substantial proportion of migration to post-Soviet Russia is of a clandestine nature, it is impossible to accurately gauge the size of the Vietnamese population in the country, and estimates vary widely. According to International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2008, p. 25), there were around 69,076 Vietnamese people in Russia as of 2008. However, this figure did not include irregular migrants, whether in transit or living in Russia on a long-term basis, as well as shuttle and seasonal traders. According to Russia's Federal Ministry of Labor, Vietnam is one of the leading sources of irregular migration to Russia, alongside the Caucasus, Central Asian countries, and China (ICMPD, 2006). The Vietnamese government estimated that there were between 80,000 and 100,000 Vietnamese nationals in Russia as of 2007.¹⁹ A more recent source suggests that there are up to 150,000 Vietnamese

19 Source: Sài Gòn Giải Phóng, 17 Jan 2007, <http://www.sggp.org.vn/chinhtri/2007/1/81930/>, accessed 12 January 2015.



immigrants in Russia (Nožina, 2010, p. 229). If this is correct, Vietnamese nationals in Russia make up half of the total Vietnamese population in the former Eastern European socialist bloc (Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, 2005; Williams & Balaz, 2005). It is predicted that Vietnamese migration to Russia will continue to grow in the years to come (Ivakhnyuk, 2008; Rybakovsky & Ryazantsev, 2005, p. 14). New legal and institutional barriers put up by the Russian government to deter irregular immigration do not stop people coming; they only make it more expensive.

Vietnamese migrants in Russia, like their compatriots in Eastern and Central Europe, mostly engage in market trade (see Drbohlav et al., 2008; Romaniszyn, 1997; Rybakovsky & Ryazantsev, 2005; Williams & Balaz, 2005). Kamenskiy (2002, p. 94) estimates that 91.6 percent of Vietnamese migrants in Russia generate their incomes from trade and commerce, often without work permits, a figure much higher than what is reported for Central and other Eastern European countries (around 70 percent: see Williams & Balaz, 2005, p. 545). The heavy concentration of Vietnamese migrants in market trade today is largely shaped by a restrictive and exclusionary migration regime that blocks their access to formal employment opportunities. Yet it was originally driven by the failure of the redistributive system to produce and deliver goods – a common feature of command economies of Eastern Europe (Sik & Wallace, 1999, p. 699). In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration, consumer goods scarcity became even more acute as light industry was falling apart while formal international trade and commerce channels had not been established (A. Larin, 2012, p. 41). Across Russia, factories were closed down, collective farms were abandoned, and the central government was, in effect, bankrupt. The political change and economic reform gave the Vietnamese an opportunity to develop their fragmented, spontaneous, and discreet trade activities into an extensive ethnic economy that fuels further migration to Russia.

Migrants' lives are highly unpredictable, characterized by the cyclical booms and busts of market trade (which have mostly been caused by knee-jerk, reactive policy changes by the federal and Moscow governments) and routine anti-immigration campaigns. With no opportunities for social mobility beyond the shadow economy, Vietnamese migrants are confined to wholesale markets, which entrenches their social marginalization and vulnerability. This is confirmed by large-scale quantitative surveys on Chinese migrant traders, who report multiple difficulties associated with exorbitant rentals, a high cost of living, excessive taxes, a volatile economy, and the bad reputation of Chinese products (A. Larin, 2012, p. 42). Most



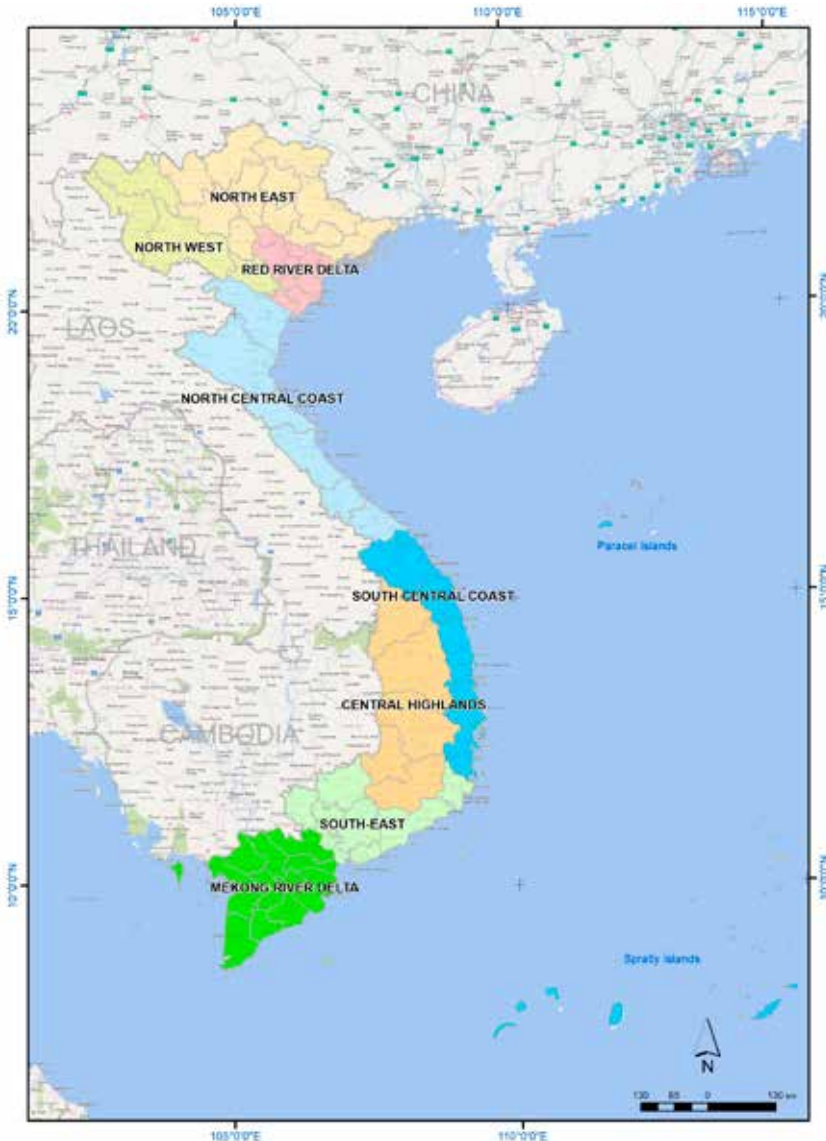
of these issues are directly or indirectly attributable to the widespread corruption in state bureaucracies, which presents itself in various forms, from police harassment and protection racketeering to a multitude of migration-related procedures and expenses and graft and bribery among tax and customs officials. In the shadow economy, migrants' social lives are severely circumscribed by exploitative market regimes and opportunistic criminals who enjoy a sense of impunity due to the migrants' irregular status. In recent years, Vietnamese migrants have been expanding to other economic sectors in remote and frontier regions within Russia. Reports of Vietnamese workers employed at construction sites and agricultural farms in Siberia and the Russian Far East have started to surface (V. Larin, 2012, p. 71; Soboleva, 2005, p. 58). Yet a lack of language skills and fear of racist attacks are still major barriers to their attempts to move beyond market trade and metropolitan regions.

Transnational migration is a relatively recent phenomenon in Vietnam; therefore, unlike their Chinese peers (Benton & Pieke, 1998; Pieke et al., 2004), most Vietnamese migrants in Russia do not come from regions with a so-called 'culture of migration.' However, there is no doubt that informal social networks play a vital role in Vietnamese spontaneous migration (see detailed discussion in Chapter III and also Hoang, 2011, 2016b). Because an opportunity to migrate overseas for work or education before the 1990s was treated as a reward for loyalty to the communist regime, the Vietnamese in today's Russia mostly hail from Northern and North Central Vietnam. In these regions, families of war martyrs, war veterans, and state employees were the main beneficiaries of labor export programs. Northern and North Central Vietnam have been plagued by severe under- and unemployment²⁰ since the launch of *Đổi mới*²¹ reforms. During the *Đổi mới* years (between 1991 and 2000), Vietnam went from one of the 40 poorest and least-developed countries in the world to the second biggest rice exporter, with an average growth rate of 7.6 percent per

20 While official statistics indicate relatively low unemployment and underemployment rates in Vietnam – 2.22 and 2.96 percent respectively in 2011 (<http://gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=714>) – academic studies are much less optimistic. Nguyen and Ezaki (2005, p. 11), for example, suggests that around 70 percent of rural residents can be seen as underemployed if full-time employment is to involve 2000 hours of work annually. This is due to the limited availability of arable land and off-farm jobs.

21 *Đổi mới* (Renovation) refers to the economic reforms launched in Vietnam in 1986, moving the country from the command economy to the so-called 'socialist-oriented market economy.' The most important reforms included the decollectivization of agricultural production, the permission of private ownership and a multi-sector economy, and the liberalization of foreign trade and investment.

Map 1 Regions of Vietnam



Source: Đỗ Minh Phương (2019)²²

annum (APEC, 2002). Hunger was substantially reduced and the poverty rate was halved from 60 percent in 1990 to 29 percent in 2002 (Akardie et al., 2010).

22 This map was developed by Đỗ Minh Phương, Senior Researcher, Remote Sensing and GIS Center, National Institute of Agricultural Planning and Projection (NIAPP), Vietnam

Yet this impressive economic growth and the unprecedented income-generating opportunities it generates have disproportionately benefited those with education, skills, and connections with the communist regime, widening the gap between the elites and those without these crucial forms of cultural and social capital. The abolition of state subsidies in agricultural production, education, healthcare, and many other social benefits is accompanied by consistently high inflation rates, low productivity, and underemployment. More than one-fifth of the population still lives under the international poverty line of USD 1.25 per day and most pockets of poverty remain in rural areas (Badiani et al., 2013). Wiens (1998, p. 94) has linked rural poverty in Vietnam with a number of factors, such as the shortage and low quality of productive resources, lack of access to markets, and high numbers of dependents relative to productive resources. With around 1,000 persons per square kilometer of agricultural land, the farming sector in Vietnam is one of the most overcrowded in the world (Dollar & Litvack, 1998, p. 12; Kabeer, Tran, & Vu, 2005, p. 5). The Red River Delta in the North, which is the main source of migrants to Russia, is one of the most densely populated rural areas in Asia. The rural provinces of Bắc Ninh and Hưng Yên, for example, had respective population densities of 1,289 and 1,242 persons per square kilometer, as of 2011.²³ While the distribution of agricultural land in the 1980s and 1990s was relatively equitable in the North, the area of land available for distribution was very limited. Average farm size is a little more than one-third of a hectare in the Red River Delta. Land fragmentation as a result of local authorities' attempts to avoid 'land wars' made the matter even worse. Rice farming is treated as a subsistence guarantee since incomes generated from this activity are too limited for it to be a viable route to upward mobility (Bryant, 1998, p. 256).

Problems of under- and unemployment are particularly acute in places where the intense population pressure on limited arable land has long rendered subsistence farming unviable. With 66.4 percent of the population living in rural areas as of 2015 and 48 percent of the labor force employed in the agricultural sector as of 2012,²⁴ underemployment is widespread. While official statistics indicate that Vietnam has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world – 2.2 percent as of 2013 – the figure is highly inaccurate due to dubious

23 Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, <https://www.gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=387&idmid=3&ItemID=12875>, accessed 10 June 2016.

24 Source: CIA Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vn.html>, accessed 10 June 2016.



statistical methods.²⁵ The General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO) defines an unemployed person as someone who had not worked at all in the week preceding the survey, meaning even one hour of work during that week would qualify one as employed. Under- and unemployment rates are most severe in the Red River Delta. While the figures in Table 1 below are underreported, they still show the Red River Delta to be a region with exceptionally high rates of under- and unemployment. An academic source, however, suggests that three-quarters of the Red River Delta rural population could be considered underemployed (Bui, 2004, p. 188). Off-farm employment tends to be available only to small groups of farmers living in areas in close proximity to urban centers and markets. Only eight million out of the total 30 million members of the rural labor force have some off-farm employment (Bui, 2004, p. 194).

Table 1 Under- and Unemployment rates by region in 2014

	Unemployment			Underemployment		
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural
Country	2.10	3.4	1.49	2.35	1.20	2.90
Red River Delta	2.82	4.86	1.87	2.44	0.99	3.12
Northern Highlands	0.76	2.35	0.46	1.45	1.03	1.52
Northern Central Coastal areas	2.23	3.71	1.70	2.58	1.86	2.84
Central Highlands	1.22	1.94	0.93	2.49	1.89	2.73
Southeast	2.47	3.00	1.60	0.61	0.30	1.11
Mekong River Delta	2.06	2.79	1.83	4.20	2.32	4.80

Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, <https://www.gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=714>, accessed 10 June 2016

In a context where the return on farming is marginal and yet off-farm income-generating opportunities are few and far between, transnational migration for work, be it of regular or irregular nature, becomes the obvious choice for many. At present, there are two principal, distinct flows of transnational migration for work from Vietnam, particularly from the densely-populated North and resource-poor North Central: 1) low-waged contract workers deployed by state-owned enterprises to other Asian countries under bilateral agreements between governments; and 2) irregular, spontaneous migration to post-communist countries in Eastern

²⁵ Source: 'Dubious statistical methods skew Vietnam's unemployment rate', <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/business/108082/dubious-statistical-methods-skew-vietnam-s-unemployment-rate.html>, accessed 21 June 2015.

Europe, including Russia. Under the formal labor export program, there are about 500,000 contract workers currently employed in various Asian countries, with Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea, and the Middle East as the top destinations.²⁶ Most Vietnamese workers migrate on two- or three-year contracts, with men concentrated in construction sites, farms, and industrial estates and women in manufacturing industries and personal and social services (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015a). While they sound different in terms of pathways, work regimes, and state governance (or the lack thereof), both migration flows are controlled by complex and highly exploitative transnational brokerage networks. In my previous studies, I have revealed how the expanding migration industry thrives on migrants' structural vulnerabilities, partly by blurring the lines between legality and illegality, state and market, and discipline and exploitation (Hoang, 2016b, 2017; Hoang & Yeoh, 2015a). In Chapter III of this book, I offer further insights into the vital role of transnational intermediaries in shaping Vietnamese out-migration flows in an increasingly interconnected world.

Because Vietnamese migration to Eastern European destinations is largely undocumented, the commercial brokerage networks catering to this corridor are even more sophisticated and exploitative than those we find in the intra-Asian migration industry. Russia has signed bilateral agreements on labor migration with all major source countries including China, but there is no such legal framework with Vietnam. Like their Chinese peers (see Datsyshen, 2012, p. 31; V. Larin, 2012, p. 69), Vietnamese migrants are most likely to enter Russia on a one-month tourist visa or three-month visitor visa and overstay. A small number of migrants are able to 'buy' a work permit (*ПВП – Разрешение на временное проживание*) that is valid for one or three years, but the work permit is becoming more expensive and difficult to obtain. Unlike the labor export regime, where the brokerage system is, for the most part, formalized (in Vietnam, labor export licenses are granted only to certain state-owned enterprises: see Hoang & Yeoh, 2015a; Hoang, 2017), commercial brokers catering to Russia-bound migrants are exclusively informal, private services operating on an impromptu, opportunistic basis. They thrive on the endemic corruption within Russian state bureaucracies and Russia's seemingly boundless capacity to absorb foreign labor. While Vietnamese migration to Russia is overwhelmingly of an economic nature, the ease of entry also makes the country an ideal hideaway for men and women running away from problems in their intimate,

26 Source: <http://laodong.com.vn/Tin-Tuc/75850-LDVN-di-lam-viec-o-nuoc-ngoai/23376>, accessed 8 November 2011.



social, and economic lives. A tourist or visitor visa obtainable within three to five days at a relatively low cost offers many an extremely affordable getaway from marital woes, business failures, debt insolvency, and even impending incarceration and death penalties. It is much more difficult and costly to migrate to other Eastern European countries. Transfer to the Czech Republic assisted by unlicensed agencies, for example, costs between USD 7,000 and 12,000, while a labor contract secured through a licensed agency costs each worker around USD 7,500 – a significant investment for migrants from rural areas, one that often takes them one to three years to recover (Nožina, 2010, p. 239).

Population movements from Vietnam to Russia challenge the tendency to characterize international migration as unidirectional flows from the periphery (i.e. developing countries) to the core (i.e. the developed world or 'global cities') (Piore, 1979; Sassen, 2001). As of 2010, transnational movements within the periphery accounted for one third of international migration and were almost equal to the periphery-center migration pathway (35 percent: IOM, 2013). Since 2000, the annual migrant stock in peripheral areas has been growing at a higher rate than that of developed centers (2.3 percent and 2.1 percent, respectively, during the period from 2000 to 2013: UN, 2013a). The literature on migration to Eastern and Central Europe shows that some peripheral and semi-peripheral regions have become destinations of choice for large segments of migrants from the developing world (Benton & Pieke, 1998; Demko, Ioffe, & Zayonchkovskaya, 1999; Pieke et al., 2004). Peripheral destinations have their own appeal – what is often considered a 'problem' and a barrier to economic growth elsewhere (for example, a loosely regulated market, weak law enforcement, widespread corruption, and an underdeveloped entrepreneurial culture) constitutes a particularly propitious economic environment for opportunistic investors and traders looking to 'make a fast buck.' In transitional societies, ethnic enclaves develop rapidly, in response to not only the need to be self-sufficient, but also the uncertainties engendered by the volatile social, economic, and political climate.

Vietnamese migration to Russia is aptly captured by Douglas Massey's (1990) notion of 'cumulative causation.' Drawing on Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal's (1957) work, Massey contends that migration is a self-perpetuating phenomenon since each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, therefore making additional movement progressively more likely. The continual expansion of Vietnamese market trade boosts the demand for ethnic goods and services, encouraging more migrants to come. Despite sharing the marketplace with other ethnic groups, Vietnamese people's daily lives

revolve around strictly co-ethnic circles, which are self-sufficient in most aspects. Broadly speaking, the Vietnamese making a living at the market or from it can be found in five occupational categories: 1) entrepreneurs (garment factory owners and hostel owners/operators); 2) traders (market traders, long-distance merchants, shuttle traders, customs-confiscated goods dealers, shop assistants, grocery suppliers, itinerant grocery vendors, and newspaper sellers); 3) caterers (restaurateurs, coffee shop owners, cooks, waiters, food deliverers, and itinerant food vendors); 4) service providers (barbers, hairdressers, manicurists, clothes alterers, masseuses, porters, drivers, shoe menders, private security/bodyguards, and translators); and 5) go-betweens (real estate dealers, migration brokers, courier service providers, money transfer agents, education brokers, and all-purpose middlemen). There are also a number of people making a living from illicit activities: debt collectors, small-time moneylenders, loan sharks, drug dealers, sex workers, football bookmakers, lottery syndicate ringleaders, and gamblers. Russia, with one of the largest shadow economies in the world (see Schneider, Buehn, & Montenegro, 2010), proves to be an ideal haven for low-skilled, irregular migrants who would not be able to find the same economic opportunities in a more tightly regulated economy.

There are, nevertheless, some exceptional individuals who have been able to move away from the marketplace and the shadow economy. Capitalizing on their prized cultural capital in terms of Russian higher education qualifications, language proficiency, and knowledge of Russian polity and society, a small number of former students have successfully established their own places in the formal economy. Given Vietnamese migrants' concentration in the garment trade, it makes sense that most of the Vietnamese-owned enterprises in the formal economy are garment factories (which are often referred to as 'white factories' [*xưởng may trắng*] as opposed to illegal factories or 'black factories' [*xưởng may đen*]). There has been some recent, albeit modest, diversification to real estate development. With their growing economic success and political connections, some Vietnamese entrepreneurs have successfully lobbied the Vietnamese and Russian governments to endorse and support their further expansion in the formal economy. On his state visit to Russia on 10 May 2015, for example, Vietnamese President Trương Tấn Sang made a formal request to Moscow Governor Andrey Vorobyov to allow the establishment of a Vietnamese-owned industrial zone in the Greater Moscow region.²⁷ Vietnamese presence in the formal

27 Source: <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/the-gioi/nga-bat-dau-giai-doan-moi-ra-soat-xuong-may-den-cua-nguoi-viet-3218018.html>, accessed 27 May 2015.



economy of Russia, nevertheless, remains very modest. No Vietnamese enterprise has been able to establish a recognizable brand name like their Chinese counterparts elsewhere in Europe (see Pieke et al., 2004, p. 137). Even their presumed monopoly over garment factories is being threatened by Chinese competitors, as there are reports of Chinese migrants engaging in similar activities in the Russian Far East (see Alexseev, 2006, p. 125). With the Chinese migrant population projected to continue to grow, life at the market will become even more uncertain in the foreseeable future.

Mobility in times of uncertainty

Uncertain time, uncertain life

Migration and mobilities provide opportunities for challenging pre-existing and emerging identities and social relations (Van de Veer, 1995). In the context of transnational migration, the changes triggered by one's physical mobility are particularly profound because of not only the attendant shift in membership and rights, but also the transition to a new sociocultural milieu. Whether those changes are positive or negative, celebrated or loathed is shaped by multifarious factors. That is, individuals undertaking the same movements in temporal and spatial terms do not necessarily experience them the same way because they are 'classed, raced and gendered bodies in motion in specific historical contexts within certain political formations and spaces' (Smith, 2005, p. 238). Migration is also fraught with disruptions. Collective experiences of certain migration regimes and foreign cultures may create agency, solidarity, and a sense of inclusion as well as division, exclusion, or even conflict. The routinization of uncertainty and insecurity in migrants' lives in Moscow provides me with an opportunity to examine how core social values and cultural logics that underpin Vietnamese personhood are being challenged and reconstituted by mobility and the ethos of a post-socialist market economy. Using the notion of uncertainty as a conceptual lens, I bring to the fore crucial questions about the relationships between money and morality in Vietnamese society at large.

The decision to use uncertainty as a central concept in this book is informed by empirical evidence on the Russian migration regime and its impact on migrants' lives (Davé, 2014a; Hoang, 2015). As mentioned earlier, a vast majority of the estimated 150,000 Vietnamese in Russia are irregular migrants (Nožina, 2010, p. 229). Positive projections about the future growth of the Vietnamese population notwithstanding (Ivakhnyuk,



2008; Rybakovsky & Ryazantsev, 2005, p. 14), there are no signs that Russian immigration policies will become more welcoming to non-Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)²⁸ citizens in the near future. The academic literature on Vietnamese nationals in Russia is almost non-existent except for some brief remarks in policy-oriented quantitative studies conducted by Russian scholars (Ivakhnyuk, 2008; Kamenskiy, 2002; Ryazantsev, 2005). The lack of empirical knowledge about such a large group of transient migrants in the volatile political and economic situations of Russia cripples our ability to effect change in this important migration corridor.

Post-Soviet Russia, with its volatile economy, restrictive (and heavily corrupt) migration regime (Gavrilova, 2001; Yudina, 2005), and disturbing levels of hostility towards foreign migrants (Alexseev, 2011; Tishkov, Zayonchkovskaya, & Vitkovskaya, 2005, p. 23; Yudina, 2005, p. 597), proves to be a particularly unwelcoming host society. Within such an inhospitable environment, the ghettoization of irregular migrants in isolated ethnic markets both results from and further entrenches their exclusion from Russian society, which is still embroiled in its own social mayhem in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union. Over four years of fieldwork in Moscow, I heard and witnessed countless accounts of dramatic changes to people's lives: some went from rags to riches overnight, while others suffered freefalls from wealth to destitution in a matter of months. Implicated in these mind-blowing tales are vivid narratives of love and hate, trust and betrayal, unions and breakups, violence and camaraderie, fear and courage, despair and hope. It was surreal to sit among Vietnamese market traders in their cramped dormitories night after night and hear them recount stories of Hollywood-style kidnappings, rapes, robberies, and murders that had happened to their business partners, friends, relatives, and acquaintances during the two turbulent decades following the Soviet Union's dissolution. The Russian state's ambivalent attitude to foreign migrants (i.e. maintaining restrictive immigration policies on the one hand and turning a blind eye to the growing presence of irregular migrants on the other) leaves them in a perpetual state of uncertainty and precarity. Millions of migrants, most of whom are from former communist allies, endure an irregular status for indefinite periods of time with no settlement prospects. A deep-seated sense of uncertainty, however, is also highly productive. The Vietnamese I met in Moscow were highly resilient, creative, and resourceful

28 The Commonwealth of Independent States (*Содружество Независимых Государств*) is a regional association of nine former Soviet Republics – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – founded in 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

in their everyday lives, actively seeking to build new relationships and embracing the trials and tribulations of life with ease. Uncertainty, indeed, shapes people's ways of knowing and being (Cooper & Pratten, 2015b). As demonstrated later in the book, the particular life circumstances and social relationships that uncertainty produces transform people's sense of place, space, and identity in the most profound manner.

In contexts of uncertainty, social values, belief systems, and moral codes of conduct are put to the test. The choices that migrants make in their everyday life in Russia are reflective of both the power structures in which they are embedded and the particular transnational social fields that they inhabit. 'Diaspora,' Vertovec and Cohen (1999) argue, is a fluid and multi-local construct rather than something fixed and closed. As the 'community' with the largest concentration of irregular migrants, Vietnamese nationals in Russia are confronted with fundamental questions about identity and belonging that are dissimilar from those faced by their fellow countrymen in other contexts. Conditions of illegality, uncertainty, and insecurity unite and divide them at the same time. Social networks take on new meanings when they become the principal – if not only – system of social security while, at the same time, trust comes to be increasingly tenuous. In my analysis, I am concerned with the myriad ways that such liminal and precarious conditions of life fashion people's conduct in day-to-day living as well as their projections of the future. This knowledge deepens our understanding of the processes of mobility and social change in post-communist societies that continue to grapple with yawning chasms between the old and the new, the local and the global, policy and practice, and obsolete governance techniques and rapidly changing ways of life.

Uncertainty: conceptual debates

Theoretically, this study is underpinned by an understanding that uncertainty is both a lived and imagined experience that shapes individuals' dispositions to social practices. Uncertainty, whether real or perceived, calculable or incalculable, has become a dominant trope, an 'inevitable force' in subjective experience of contemporary life (Cooper & Pratten, 2015b; Johnson-Hanks, 2005, p. 366; Kinnvall, 2004, p. 742). Increasingly, empirical studies have cast doubt upon the theorization of social action as the fulfillment of a prior intention (or a rational calculation), overemphasizing agency at the expense of structure (Schutz, 1967; Searle, 1983). On the other hand, questions have also been raised about the claims that Bourdieu's (1990) notion of habitus, which refers to an objective basis for regular modes of



behavior, resolves the subject-object dualism in social theory (Brubaker, 1985, 1993; de Certeau, 1984; DiMaggio, 1979; King, 2000). The main assumption of the habitus is that much of human behavior follows particular regular modes of practices and is thus predictable. Because such a position implies the role of a priori rules in determining social action, Bourdieu has been criticized for slipping 'back into exactly the kind of objectivism that he refutes' (King, 2000, p. 418). There is ample evidence from developing and transitional societies that challenges causal links between a priori intention or a priori rules and social action, particularly in situations of lived or perceived uncertainties. In contexts where uncertainty and insecurity are routinized features of life, there does not seem to be a consistent or clearly defined frame of reference that may render social conduct predictable. In Cameroon, where everyday life is unpredictable and inconsistent, for example, Johnson-Hanks (2005) observes that social action is not based on the fulfillment of prior intentions but on judicious opportunism. In other words, people just grasp at whatever is available in the present when projections of future perfects prove particularly tenuous (Johnson-Hanks, 2005, p. 366). My previous research on Vietnamese migrants in Taiwan has also shown that the most fundamental moral principles regulating social relationships can be easily cast aside when they conflict with migrants' immediate, vital interests, or even potentially aggravate their exclusion and vulnerability in a foreign society (Hoang, 2016b). There are no particular patterns or consistent rules with regard to social networking, leading to the erosion of trust within the 'community.'

The inconsistency and unpredictability of social practice are particularly salient in the social life of Vietnamese migrants in Russia. In a climate riddled with fear, distrust, anxiety, and insecurity, the social structures that serve as preconditions for routinized behavior are disabled or disrupted, compelling greater degrees of deviancy and delinquency. Boundaries are easily shifted, and social values reset to accommodate constantly changing needs and priorities. Over time, the deviant becomes the new normal. Bourdieu has also acknowledged the intersubjectivity and situatedness of social practice. Specifically, he considers social agents the so-called 'virtuosos,' who have a 'sense of game' but know the script so well that they do not allow themselves to be dominated by abstract social principles; instead, they elaborate and improvise in light of their relations with others and tailor their action to the context (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79). While I do not totally discount predictable, routinized behaviors in this book, I am more concerned with the 'improvisation' aspect of social practice as well as the social values and cultural logics underpinning it.

In what has been characterized by Beck (1992) as 'risk society,' one should expect greater degrees of uncertainty and deviancy in human behaviors. While risk is treated by economists as a rational, objective, and quantifiable phenomenon, sociological studies have pointed out that risk is a social construction that is constantly negotiated and interpreted within particular social contexts and cultural histories (Douglas, 1992; Lupton, 1999). Given the reflexive nature of modernity (Beck, 1992), people's perception of and response to potential risks are grounded in both their subjective knowledge and the institutional structures they are embedded in. People, Nelkin (2003, p. viii) concurs, perceive risks through different 'frames' that reflect their values, world views, and concepts of social order. These frames can influence definitions of risk, allocations of responsibility and blame, and ideas about appropriate decision-making authority. It is important to bear in mind that the subjectivity in risk and uncertainty is socioculturally constructed and mediated.

Beck (1992) also draws systematic interlinkages between the social production of wealth and the social production of risks, and points out the far-reaching damages of globalization to modern societies. However, the preoccupation with risks that have global impact, including technological risks, ecological crises, and economic downturns, has overshadowed the everydayness of social risk and uncertainty at the individual, micro level. It is the mundanity and routinization of risk and uncertainty in social life that holds the power to transform one's notion of personhood and social relationships. The so-called 'new risks' (as opposed to pre-industrial risks) that pervade our contemporary life are man-made side-effects of modernization and the social processes that ensue, including consumerism and individualism. These man-made hazards are primarily produced by prevalent institutional contradictions in risk societies (Beck, 1999). Risks in modern societies are, by essence, produced by the rules, institutions, and capacities that structure the identification and assessment of risk in a specific sociocultural context (Beck, 1999, p. 149).

Indeed, in the context of Vietnamese migration to Russia, the insecurity, uncertainty, and precarity that migrants have to deal with arise from the tension and contradictions between policy and practice, and post-communist governmentality and the realities of socioeconomic lives in Russia. Foreign migrants are treated as a security threat, a menace to an ethnically homogeneous society. Embedded in different notions of risk is the underlying issue of uncertainty, stemming from varying conditions of imperfect knowledge, ambiguity, and unpredictability (Lupton, 1999; Williams & Baláž, 2012; Yeoh, Platt, Khoo, Lam, & Baey, 2016). However, Beck has overlooked the



fluidity and heterogeneity of culture (beyond what is produced by the modernization process) and the intersectionality of key social markers such as race, class, gender, and sexuality in the discourse, representation, and practice relating to risks (see also Dean, 1999; Tulloch, 2008). Risks, Zinn and Taylor-Gooby (2006, p. 54) argue, are 'discursively constructed in everyday life with reference to the mass media, individual experience and biography, local memory, moral convictions, and personal judgments.'

The risks and uncertainties that the Vietnamese in my study are confronted with on a daily basis are produced by the complicity and contradiction between three principal institutions: the state, the market, and the media. Yet the marked differences in the ways Vietnamese and members of other ethnic groups (which are subject to the same regulatory regime and discursive space) respond to those risks and uncertainties underscore the significance of cultural values, symbols, and beliefs (see also Lash, 2000; Mythen & Walklate, 2005). By adopting a sociocultural lens in my analysis of uncertainty, I seek to engage with and advance both the 'cultural turn' scholarship and the sociology of risk. It is impossible to obtain in-depth knowledge of the transnational lives of Vietnamese migrants in Russia without taking into account the myriad ways in which institutional rules and structures intersect cultural values, ideologies, and practices. People's representation of and response to risk and uncertainty, I emphasize, reflect not only the institutional context they are embedded in, but also the cultural background from which they come.

A central concern in my examination of Vietnamese migrants' lives in Russia is trust (or the lack thereof). In the face of risk and uncertainty, trust is the key to action (Williams & Baláž, 2012; Zinn, 2008). Trust is particularly important to individuals on the move because they tend to have incomplete knowledge of the new environment and the people around them. As Lewis and Weigert (1985, p. 462) note, 'trust begins where knowledge ends.' Yet, without knowledge, there is no basis for trust (Williams & Baláž, 2012, p. 177). The absence of shared values and routines that are prerequisite elements of trust (Anheier & Kendall, 2002, p. 347) discourages individuals from taking risks or distorts the ways they engage with them. In the context of Moscow, the lack of knowledge of and certainty about the migration regime, Russian society, and the broader economy creates a sense of apprehension and angst among Vietnamese migrants, leading them to question their pre-existing knowledge about the values and routines they share with their fellow countrymen. Deviant behaviors, in many contexts, represent the self-defense mechanisms of those who constantly live on the edge.



Ironically, by disrupting a shared sense of morality and community solidarity, migrants undermine their own ability to cope with risks and uncertainties. Uncertainty is thus both an antecedent and an outcome of a moral decline and social fragmentation. There is abundant evidence across disciplines about direct links between a lack of social capital and social cohesion, and poor socio-economic outcomes for individuals and the community as a whole (Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 2001; Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Putnam, 1995; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Although questions around moralities form the overall thrust of this book, they receive special attention in Chapters IV and V, where I describe how social and intimate relationships are rendered particularly fragile in a context where trust cannot be taken for granted, and lived and perceived uncertainties undermine people's ability to commit. The uncertainties examined in this book are not just social, economic, and political, but also psychological and moral.

Productive and destructive uncertainty

As a conceptual tool, uncertainty is often used in its negative and constraining sense in association with opacity, risk, insecurity, instability, and the inability to predict the outcome of events or actions (Berthomé, Bonhomme, & Delaplace, 2012; Cooper & Pratten, 2015b). As such, it is a problem with the potential to disrupt and distress lives. In her ethnographic account of contemporary life in Cameroon, Johnson-Hanks (2005, p. 366) offers insights into how uncertainty is described as being accountable for incompetence, graft, sexual infidelity, school failure, and even witchcraft. The widespread sense of crisis and unpredictability legitimates and reinforces both the interpretation of the world as uncertain and behavior that contributes to that uncertainty.

Risks and uncertainty are also seen to possess positive and productive potential (Cooper & Pratten, 2015a; Zaloom, 2004). Empirical studies have provided ample evidence of how uncertainty is used as a social resource to negotiate insecurity, conduct or even create relationships, and project the future (Berthomé et al., 2012; Carey, 2012; Cooper & Pratten, 2015a; de Vienne, 2012). As the basis of curiosity and exploration, uncertainty 'can call forth considered action to change both the situation and the self,' bringing about new social landscapes and social horizons (Whyte, 2009, p. 214). Yet it is important to note that, as a ground for action, uncertainty fashions unique dispositions, a particular mood of action. With a lived experience of uncertainty and precariousness, the subject approaches the present and the future with doubt, hope, caution, tentativeness, and provisionality. This



so-called ‘subjunctive mood’ of action (Whyte, 2005) becomes a basis for regular modes of behavior. The subjunctive nature of action is, nevertheless, inconsistent with the precondition of trust, namely ‘regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms’ (Fukuyama, 1995), weakening people’s ability to successfully navigate social relationships.

The concept of uncertainty employed in this study has some parallels with Erik Harms’ (2011) notion of ‘social edginess,’ both of which prove particularly fitting for research on post-socialist and transitional societies. In his ethnographic account of transformations in Hồ Chí Minh City’s urban fringe, Harms (2011) uses ‘social edginess’ to describe ambivalences and contradictions in the lives of people belonging neither here nor there, marginalized in not only spatial but also social and economic terms – an existential mode that is both empowering and alienating. In the face of marginalization and deepening inequalities, edginess operates like the double-edged sword, sometimes cutting back against structures of power and sometimes cutting the very social agents who wield it (Harms, 2011, p. 4). Living on the edge is about opportunity or despair, power or exclusion, depending who you ask. Harms’ ideas about social edginess resonate strongly with what I observed in Russia and I will draw on his work extensively throughout this analysis. Yet, unlike his interlocutors, my research participants are mobile subjects circulating in a foreign, alienating environment where life is highly insecure and unpredictable. Edginess indicates some sense of a static, sedentary existence, while uncertainty allows me to capture the fickle nature of life that conditions migrants’ social practices.

In this book, I am concerned with both the productive and destructive power of uncertainty due to their equally important, complementary roles in Vietnamese migrants’ livelihoods and social lives. In some circumstances, the routinization of uncertainty breeds feelings of envy, jealousy, and distrust, and leads to competition, tension, conflict, betrayal, and sexual infidelity. In other situations, uncertainty functions as a productive resource that motivates individuals to seek out new social relationships and strengthen existing ones. Routine experiences of uncertainty also boost people’s resilience, positivity, and optimism in their day-to-day lives and projections of the future. Uncertainty in the life of Vietnamese migrants in Russia is not merely a perception: it is a lived experience, a stark reality. It dictates people’s conduct of business at the market, permeates social and personal relationships, and (re)shapes their sense of moral self. In the context of mobility, social exclusion, and uncertainty, social norms and values are subject to constant renegotiations and relationships are routinely reassessed to accommodate the ever-emerging contingencies.



Migration itself is seen as a risky undertaking, even as it represents a coping strategy of dealing with risk and uncertainty for individuals, households, and communities (Charsley, 2007; Williams & Baláž, 2012). As discussed earlier, physical displacement often entails multifarious disruptions to migrants' social lives, leading many to scramble for a new 'mooring' upon which some sense of stability and security can hopefully be restored. In the Moscow context, I found that money, which is highly valued for its 'unconditional interchangeability' and 'uncompromising objectivity' (see Simmel, 2011), has emerged as a new 'mooring' in migrants' lives. As disenfranchised, invisible migrants in a foreign society, other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that they possess might easily be rendered worthless. In that situation, money is the only steady element with a value independent of inconsistencies and insecurities in the migrant's transnational life. Money, Zelizer (1997, p. 19) notes, is a socially created currency, 'subject to particular networks of social relations and its own set of values and norms.' Yet, as I show later in the book, a preoccupation with money and money-making carries its own social risks.

Structure of this book

In this book, I am primarily concerned with how uncertainty, whether as a lived experience, a perception, an ethos, or a mode of action, can be productive as well as destructive for social relationships. The case of Vietnamese migrants in Moscow provides me with an opportunity to examine how the core social values and cultural logics that underpin Vietnamese personhood are being challenged and reconstituted by the mobilities and ethos of a post-socialist market economy. In so doing, I highlight crucial questions about the relationships between money and morality in Vietnamese society at large. The chapters of the book are organized along three main analytical axes of the concept of uncertainty within a sociocultural framework, namely: (1) the institutional, in Chapter II: Russia's post-Soviet migration regime, and Chapter III: Navigating Russia's shadow economy; (2) the social, in Chapter IV: Market ethos and the volatile radius of trust, and Chapter V: Love and sex in times of uncertainty; and (3) the cultural/subjective, in Chapter VI: Transient existence and the quest for certainty. In what follows, I provide a short summary of how I tackle my core concerns in each chapter.

The routinization of uncertainty in migrants' lives in Moscow, I argue, is first and foremost produced by an exclusionary and corrupt migration regime. In Chapter II, I provide an overview of international migration



flows to Russia during and after the Soviet era before discussing the inner contradictions of the Russian migration regime. As I point out in subsequent chapters, inconsistencies and contradictions in the way the state deals with transnational migrants lead the migrants to resort to the behaviors that seemingly justify further restrictive and repressive government techniques from the state. The securitization of migration helps to legitimate the so-called 'migrantophobic' sentiments among local Russians, pushing migrants to the edge of society and the depths of the shadow economy. Illegality is thus a self-perpetuating paradox. As the most powerful force regulating migrants' lives and dictating their behaviors, in-depth knowledge of the Russian migration regime is instructive for understanding how Vietnamese migrants conduct themselves in their transnational lives.

Chapter III delves deeper into the institutional structures and processes that render migrants' lives precarious and vulnerable. Unlike Chapter II, where I look at the governmentality of Russia's migration regime at the macro level, Chapter III provides ethnographic insights into the shadow economy, where most Vietnamese migrants earn a living, and the transnational brokerage networks that facilitate and condition mobility from Vietnam to Russia. In what seems to be a *laissez-faire* system, the state and market work together to perpetuate migrants' vulnerabilities and precarities to ensure they stay docile and exploitable. In the face of an opaque, complicated, and restrictive bureaucratic system, migrants have no choice but to go through layers of unscrupulous go-betweens and predatory, corrupt civil servants to obtain the right to enter to the country, secure economic opportunities, and access basic social services. Yet I also show that migrants do not always fit the image of an innocent, passive victim. In many situations, they navigate the corrupt system with agency and occasionally succeed in outwitting or even subverting it. In the volatile context of the Russian shadow economy, the categories of exploitative brokers and victimized migrants are extremely fluid, as individuals might easily swap places when opportunities arise.

In Chapter IV, I discuss how the exploitative market regime and a perpetual angst about the uncertain future have led migrants to adopt a pragmatic and individualistic approach to life that is at odds with the communitarian values that are central to Vietnamese culture, which renders their own lives even more precarious. Co-ethnic social networks are migrants' main, if not only, sources of support, information, and social security, but might as well become a burden, liability, and major threat to their livelihoods. While I find that social ties among migrants retain many of the original features that characterize social networks in Vietnamese society (such as the central importance of family ties, the apprehension about the unknown stranger,

and barriers to membership: Dalton, Pham, Pham, & Ong, 2002; Rambo, 1973; Turner & Nguyen, 2005), they depart from certain core values that are vital to the sustenance of social networks back in Vietnam. In particular, money has come to replace the trust and reciprocity that are supposed to hold social ties together, changing the nature of social networks. Living on the margins of Russian society means existing in a moral twilight zone where migrants have considerable leeway to redefine their values and reorder their priorities. Much of the literature has been focused on Otherness as a source of fears and anxieties (for example, Delanty, 2008; Laruelle, 2010), somehow assuming Sameness is safe, undivisive, and unproblematic. This chapter calls that view into question.

Chapter V furthers my concern with how conditions of uncertainty and precarity shape the migrant's transnational life, albeit from a different angle. Ethnographic accounts in this chapter show that uncertainty can be both productive and destructive for migrants' intimate relationships. On the one hand, uncertain and transient conditions of life seem to make the transgression of Vietnamese restrictive sexuality norms more tolerable and justifiable. They help bring people together, create a sense of freedom, open up new possibilities, and blur social divisions between men and women from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, sexual-affective relationships are rendered particularly fragile by the sense of uncertainty and vulnerability, which encourages individualistic behavior and the pursuit of intimacies in a transactional and rational manner. The materials from my research in Moscow illustrate the so-called 'ethos of contingency,' which is about the tentativeness but also flexibility of people's actions when they feel they have no control over their lives or ability to predict the conditions on which they are dependent (Whyte & Siu, 2015). The chapter emphasizes the importance of situating sexuality, intimacy, and affect within the broader political economy of migration.

Chapter VI examines how migrants' transient existence in Russia shapes their sense-making with regard to self and life, as well as their aspirations for the future for themselves and their families. The choices they make today, my research shows, embody the anxieties and apprehension built up over the years through their lived experiences of pre-migration poverty and unemployment and a sense of precarity and vulnerability in Russia. Uncertainty can be extremely productive as it fosters a future-oriented disposition, cultivates feelings of hope and possibility, and provides migrants with the strength and motivation to endure hardships and make sacrifices today. Drawing on Mary Douglas's various works (Douglas, 1982; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983), this chapter uses consumption



as a lens for understanding how migrants define meaning and purpose of life. People's choices and priorities in consumption, whether through daily meals, real estate investment in Vietnam, or financing an upgrade to middle-class status for their children, express not only their identities and subjectivities, but also their social belonging. Every dollar that can be put aside is judiciously spent in such a way that a sense of certainty and security can be restored to migrants' lives. In other words, uncertainty does not eliminate the possibility of choice for the migrants but shapes their choices in such a way that would guarantee uncertainty is eliminated from their future.

