

Inspiring Narratives of Young People Whose Parents Were Born in Vietnam

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Svobodová, Andrea. 2024. *Vietnam vzdálený i blízký. Potomci Vietnamců v Česku* [Vietnam Close by and Far Away: Children of Vietnamese Descent in the Czech Republic]. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, nakladatelství Karolinum, ISBN 978-80-246-5620-5, ISBN 978-80-246-5668-7 (pdf), 156 pp.

Residents of the Czech Republic, whose parents or themselves arrived from Vietnam, have long been a source of regular scholarly literary production since the 1970s. The literature captures not only how individuals, and later entire families, adapt to changing social conditions, but the authors also gradually delve into the essential features of individual behavioural motivation, family and intergenerational relationships, and how individuals experience and think about these changes. This newly published book written in Czech complements publications with a deeper introspection of social life and its perception of the actors. It is based on a doctoral dissertation written at the Faculty of Science under the supervision of Doc. Eva Janská, with whom the author also published part of her research (Svobodová, Janská, 2016). In her book, Andrea Svobodová inventively combines concepts typical for studying migration topics in the Geomigration Association at the Faculty of Science and analysing biographical narratives that we would find in anthropological studies. The publication is built on 29 biographical narratives with 25 narrators and on analysis of blogs, Facebook pages, and other written sources.

In the introduction, she frames her work with the theory of transnationalism and transnational social space, which, since the turn of the 21st century, has helped to anchor transnational ties more clearly and give them a geosocial form. She claims that she is interested in how these relationships are formed, but from

the text, it is apparent that she primarily focuses on narrating these relationships. The narrators talk about themselves and third parties, but the only link the researcher can directly observe is the link between the researcher and the narrator. The author does not declare that she uses a hermeneutic method. However, her work with narrative approaches it significantly. Andrea Svobodová draws attention to the specificity of her work with narratives at the end of the book, identifying a weakness that she often discussed with the young narrators about their parents but did not interview parents. However, the one-sidedness of the narrative analysis is balanced by its many strengths. Also, in this publication, the strongest and most credible, given the narrative possibilities, are not the descriptions of social situations but the descriptions of how these social situations affected the actors and how the actors experienced them.

After the introductory chapter, the author discusses her research method and briefly introduces the researched group in the statistical data. A chapter entitled “Transnational Spaces of Childhood and Adolescence” is following. It pays attention to how the narrators perceived their childhoods within their families, how they experienced their parents’ behaviour and strategies in subsistence activities, their idea of social success, which the parents carry over into their children’s upbringing, and their idea of what it means to be rich, which is then reflected in their choice of school and type of education for their children. The children’s experiences in the family environment, and the expository passages on relationships in the traditional Vietnamese family successfully develop Adéla Suralová’s findings (for instance, 2019) and compare them with data collected in the U.S. and other destinations of families from Vietnam. Transnationality is then reflected in the text, mainly as Vietnamese parents communicate about their children with their relatives in Vietnam.

One of the most interesting chapters is undoubtedly “Partnership Dilemmas”. The theme of mixed marriages dominates here, and it is clear from the discussion of the data that the narrative of partner relationships is different from the narrative of childhood. The narrators were young people, peers of Andrea Svobodová. For them, partner relationships were ongoing, and many were in the premarital period. It burdens the nature of the information, although it is also precious and detailed in this case. Its credibility is enhanced by the fact that Andrea Svobodová has an eye not only for detail but also for the uniqueness of each story. The variant differentiation made possible by the biographical method is fully exploited here. The stories of the individuals are

sensitively handled, and some, such as the story of *Phuong*, make the readers forget that they are reading academic literature and are completely absorbed by the story. A good guide for *Andrea Svobodová* is the writings of *Nazli Kibria* (1993), who has explored similar themes in a broader comparative conclusion in the United States. *Andrea Svobodová's* publication shows how the age of the narrators and their distance from the subject matter play a significant role in the narrative.

The chapter on the construction of identities already brings somewhat expected conclusions and shows some limits of the biographical method as applied by the author. In this case, it neglects the situationality of identifications, which can change from moment to moment. Individuals tell stories, describe their lives, and justify their actions, but what are the chains of social actions they perform? The biographical method does not answer this question. However, one can ask why the stories were told the way they were. What did the storytellers want to convey with these stories? The author approaches this question in part by introducing the concept of disidentification, although it is not used with complete precision because the narrators showed distance from people with whom narrators probably never identified.

The last chapter before the final summary discusses the narrators' relationship to Vietnam and their relatives in Vietnam. This chapter is necessary given that the concept of transnationalism theoretically frames the whole book. In addition to noting that the use of digital media has the potential to enhance the transnational behaviour of migrant groups significantly, the narratives of some of the narrators led to believe that their transnationality is similar to that of anyone who interacts with foreign colleagues or has friends or relatives abroad. Since this is almost everyone, it is in question whether this concept, in its broad sense, is not gradually losing its meaning. As *Svobodová* shows, not everyone has a relationship with a transborder state or nation. Just as she is reluctant to refer to her narrators as Vietnamese but instead uses the label descendants of Vietnamese, in some cases, she replaces the label transnationalism with the concept of translocalism, a close relationship to a particular locality on the territory of another state.

The book demonstrates the power of biographical narratives as an analytical tool for a deeper understanding of groups of people with specific origins, social backgrounds or systems of values and norms. The individual cases analysed might lead the author to rethink our conceptual apparatus to grasp them. It is thus surprising that she does not return to the question of theory and the embedding of the case study from the Czech milieu into a broader one in the

conclusion. Even so, the book has a strong explanatory value and is written in a way that may be of interest even to readers who do not deal professionally with specific groups with a migration history.

References

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