

The Two *Tết* Festivals: Transnational Connections and Internal Diversity of the Vietnamese Community in Poland

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In the article, I present an analysis of two Tết (Lunar New Year) festivals organised by the Vietnamese living in Poland. The events, prepared by different organisations – a local branch of the Association of Vietnamese in Poland, an official organisation cooperating with the authorities of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and pro-democratic activists – provide an insight into the community's internal diversity. The analysis indicates that the political involvement of the organising parties influences their choice of particular style of presentation, with a profound impact on the attractiveness of the festival for the two important segments of audience: the Vietnamese youth brought up in Poland and the Polish spectators. The paper is based on fieldwork research which the author has been conducting among the Vietnamese community in Poland for many years.

Keywords: Vietnamese diaspora; diaspora politics; ethnic festivals

Introduction

The Vietnamese in Poland are the biggest community originating from outside Europe, numbering around 25 000–30 000 people (Wysieńska 2012; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2014). This group of foreigners is highly organised, as proved by the existence of numerous Vietnamese migrant organisations in Poland (Halik 2006; Wysieńska 2010). The community is internally diverse: various categories of migrants can be indicated according to particular factors, such as the length of their stay in Poland, occupation, or legal status.¹ In this paper, I would like to focus on the political divisions present inside the community. Differences in political views and involvement are among the most important issues discussed among the Vietnamese in Poland. I intend to show the complex character of political entanglements, discussing the case of the two *Tết* celebrations organised in 2014 by the Vietnamese community in Warsaw. The main problem discussed within the paper is the representation strategies chosen by the members of particular political circles during the organisation of the *Tết* festivals and their perception by two categories of audience: Vietnamese people residing in Poland and Poles participating in the events.

In my article, I would like to analyse the representation strategies adapted by the organisers of the two *Tết* festivals in two contexts. Firstly, I intend to describe them as an example of the discursive creation of ethnic identity, which is being built in a dialogue with the supposed perception of Vietnamese community by an

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important segment of the festival audience – the representatives of Polish society. Moreover, I will consider them as events designated to achieve some political goals – different with each celebration.

Multiple studies conducted in the areas of sociology, ethnography and social anthropology have concentrated on the role of festivals as means of creating and maintaining ethnic identity (e.g. Kasinitz, Freidenberg-Herbststein 1987; Bramadat 2001; Brettell, Reed-Danahay 2012; Moufakkir, Pernecky 2014). This way of thinking about ethnic celebrations results from adapting the constructivist view of ethnic identity, according to which identity is actively and discursively constructed during interactions with the ‘other’ (Brettell 2007; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, Liebhart 2008). In the context of ethnic minorities or migrant communities, the most important ‘other’ is commonly the majority society. However, the result of this dialogic process is inevitably impacted by the vision of a majority society, adapted by the representatives of the minorities. In my article, I will show that the organisers of the two festivals target different segments of Polish society, which is connected both with the differences in their political goals and the choice of different representation strategies.

The political dimensions of the *Tết* Festival

In the literature dedicated to migrant communities, growing attention is drawn to the issue of their political engagement. The importance of the political impact of the activity of migrants is particularly visible in the studies of diaspora politics, in which the famous book by Scheffer (2003) played a very important role. Other authors, such as Ho (2011), refrain from usage of the term ‘diaspora,’ instead concentrating on the strategies of the sending state towards the emigrants. I will refer to both authors in order to explain the nature of the political activities of the Vietnamese community in Poland. Regarding the analysis of the political impact of cultural festivals, in the case of the Vietnamese diaspora, analysis of *Tết* festivals seem to be an obvious choice due to the importance of this holiday for Vietnamese residing both in the home country and in the diaspora. *Tết* – the Lunar New Year – is univocally perceived as the most important holiday in Vietnamese culture. According to a guide on the Lunar New Year published in Hanoi, *Tết is like a combination of Christmas, Western New Year’s Day, Easter, American Thanksgiving, and everyone’s birthday. It is a festival of communion, purity, renewal, and universal peace* (Huu, Borton 2005: 4). Among the Vietnamese, *Tết* is to a large extent celebrated as a family holiday, involving not only closest family members, but also living as well as dead members of the extended family. On this occasion, people often return to their home villages (*quê*), not only to visit their relatives, but also to pay tribute to their deceased ancestors, honored in lineage halls (*nhà thờ họ*). However, after migrating, the Vietnamese have no opportunity to practice this pattern. Instead of this, they often attend celebrations organised at the community level, by particular migrant organisations.

On the other hand, *Tết* can also be defined in terms of a festival. According to Stoeltje, a festival is *an ancient and resilient cultural form, which occurs at calendrically regulated intervals and [is] public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene and purpose* (Stoeltje 1992: 261). Festival celebrations customarily take place at the community level. The celebrations organised by the Vietnamese organisations in various countries where they migrate also follow this pattern. They are typically perceived as a means to strengthen bonds inside the community and to cultivate the ethnic identity.

It must also be taken into account that the *Tết* holiday in Vietnam has also been subjected to the policy of Communist Party, which since establishing its rule in Vietnam has undertaken various actions directed towards elimination of ‘bad’ traditions and superstitions, simultaneously praising and supporting the elements of tradition that were defined as ‘good’ and reinforcing patriotic feelings (Malarney 2002; Norton 2002). In the era of *post-đổi mới* reforms, many of the previously condemned religious and traditional traditions were

approved, or at least tolerated, by the state (Roszko 2010; McAllister 2013). In the past few years, the Vietnamese authorities have become more engaged in the *Tết* festival, organising large-scale celebrations which have involved a large amount of religious and spiritual symbolism.

Tết celebrations are also organised by the immigrant Vietnamese communities dispersed around the world. Vietnam is a country with a large population of immigrants – the overseas Vietnamese (*Việt Kiều*) number around 4 million people, with almost half of them (1.73 million) residing in the USA (Le 2014). As Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2012) note in their analysis of the *Tết* festival organised by the Vietnamese community in Texas, *Tết* celebrations should be perceived not as purely cultural events, expressing nostalgia for the homeland, but also as events of political importance. As a result of their historical background, representatives of the Vietnamese diaspora are diverse in their political views. The most important aspect of this division can be aptly described by the distinction of stateless and state-linked diasporas, introduced by Scheffer (2003). While the vast majority of the Vietnamese residing in the United States are people of refugee origin who express strongly anti-communist views (Brettell, Reed-Danahay 2012; Le 2011; Phan in this volume), and the French community is internally divided into two factions (Bousquet 1991), the communities in Eastern European countries are strongly influenced by the communist state (Bayly 2009; Hüwelmeier 2013; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2014). The vast majority of the Vietnamese residing in Poland – with the exception of a few people granted refugee status – can therefore be perceived as members of the state-linked diaspora (Scheffer 2003). However, although multifold connections to the Vietnamese state are underlined by the majority of migrant organisations – as will be described in the following section – the representatives of pro-democratic activists actively oppose such connections, stressing the unity with the Vietnamese diaspora in the USA and Western Europe.²

Vietnamese migrant organisations in Poland and their political involvement

The majority of *Tết* festivals taking place in the diaspora are usually organised by immigrant institutions, such as official organisations, or unofficial social circles. In this section, I will present a general picture of the Vietnamese organisations in Poland. A basic overview of the Vietnamese institutions active in Poland, listing the main organisations, can be found in the works of Wysińska (2010) and Halik (2006). Observers may be surprised by the number of organisations, including both institutions of a general, unspecified profile (such as the Association of the Vietnamese in Poland – AVP) and specific organisations, such as the Association of Vietnamese Women and Association of Vietnamese Youth. However, this high number of organisations should not be perceived only as a result of grassroots pluralism, but as an outcome of the policy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which influences the activity among the community residing in Poland through many channels, including the Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The abovementioned institutions can be described as ‘official’ organisations, cooperating with the Embassy, as well as with the authorities of the state of Vietnam. The activity of these institutions is in fact a manifestation of the Vietnamese state’s strategy towards its ‘external citizens’ – members of the migrant community. As Ho (2011) noticed, the sending states commonly adapt various strategies, enabling them to control and impact people who emigrated from the country in order to make use of their potential. The strategy of the Vietnamese state involves the existence of official associations of Vietnamese people residing in particular countries, which are formally connected to the political institutions of Vietnam. As an example, the Association of the Vietnamese in Poland has a local branch in Hanoi, which is responsible for organising events dedicated to *Việt Kiều* returning to the country, such as a summer camp for overseas Vietnamese children in Vietnam. It also cooperates with the Hanoi-based Vietnam–Poland Friendship Association (*Hội Hữu Nghị Việt Nam – Ba Lan*),

which is one of multiple official ‘friendship organisations’ operating inside the political system of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The political involvement of particular organisations is an important issue, taking into account the fact that diaspora communities often play an important role as active agents, involved in – and influencing – the politics of migrants’ country of origin. While the Association of Vietnamese in Poland and other satellite organisations to a large extent act as a local branch of Vietnamese authorities, enacting the state politics among the diaspora members, in Poland organisations also exist that oppose the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. They are not large in terms of numbers of supporters – the activists number no more than 10–20 people – and the events organised by them are attended mostly by Polish people, with a large representation of human rights activists and students. Due to the pro-democratic activists, the main reason behind the lack of support is the fear of the diaspora members – often intending to return to Vietnam in the future – connected with involvement in anti-government activity. However, during my fieldwork I could observe that many of the Vietnamese from Poland perceive the activity of anti-communist activists as not only anti-government, but also anti-Vietnamese and unpatriotic. Pro-democratic opposition is criticised by many Vietnamese people living in Poland for denial of official symbols of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, such as the flag, which for most of the Vietnamese community in Warsaw is a legitimate symbol of their country. However, the activists are often present in the Polish mainstream media, such as *Gazeta Wyborcza*. They vote for assurance of human rights in Vietnam and for the rights of irregular migrants in Poland. An important medium in which the activists express their ideas is the online newspaper *Đàn Chim Việt*.

In my article, I would like to discuss the political involvement of the Vietnamese diaspora in Poland, focusing on the case of the two *Tết* celebrations organised in 2014 by the representatives of various social circles: the Association of Vietnamese in Poland (the official organisation), and the social circle of pro-democratic activists. It is important to stress that the ethnic festivals organised by particular migrant groups should be perceived not only as an expression of symbolic ethnicity, but also as a part of diaspora politics. As Brettell and Reed-Danahay indicate, *Ethnic festivals are an ‘entrée into a community’s symbolic, social and political life, especially because they are organised and presented to members of the community by members of the community’* (Farber 1983, quoted by Brettell, Reed-Danahay 2012: 147). The description of both festivals, provided in the next section, aims to provide an insight into the political goals of both organisers. However, while discussing the case of the Vietnamese *Tết* festivals, it should also be taken into account that the celebrations organised by the Vietnamese were designed not only for intra-community communication, but also as an opportunity to present Vietnamese culture to the Polish majority society.

The Vietnamese are typically perceived as a hermetic community, maintaining little contact with the Polish majority society and difficult to reach during social research (Halik, Nowicka 2002; Wysieńska 2010; Wysieńska 2012). However, during my fieldwork conducted among the Vietnamese community in Poland I was able to notice that the Vietnamese undertake many activities aimed at promoting their culture outside the community. For example, both events described in the article – the celebration in Raszyn and the one in the Agora headquarters in Warsaw – were advertised in Polish, and Polish people were directly invited to participate. However, the outcome of the activity relies on the particular strategies which the Vietnamese adapt during the organisation of the event, which play a decisive role concerning the issue of whether the festival will be attractive for the Polish guests or not. Therefore, I would like to present the diverse styles of self-presentation of the Vietnamese culture by the migrants which could be observed during the events and are to a large extent connected with their political involvement.

The analysis of the two *Tết* festivals is based on fieldwork data. Until recently, for 10 years I was involved in various kinds of research concerning the Vietnamese community in Poland, as well as in fieldwork conducted in Vietnam. In 2014, I embarked upon a project sponsored by the National Centre for Science,

dedicated to the issue of transnational connections of the Vietnamese migrants from Poland. As part of this project, I participated in both the *Tết* festivals analysed in this article and performed a detailed observation including making field notes thereafter. In the case of both events I participated as a regular spectator, a person of Polish origin, but with some knowledge of the Vietnamese language (intermediate level). However, during both the *Wietnam – Ba Lan Tết Festival* and the *Gala Noworoczna* in Raszyn, my identity as a researcher was recognised by some of the organisers and participants, who knew me as a university-based researcher or as a person interested in the functioning of the Vietnamese community in Poland. In the article, I will also make use of my other research experiences, including participation in various cultural spectacles organised by the Vietnamese community, as well as from my fieldwork conducted in Hanoi, where I had the opportunity to attend events organised by former migrants who have been to Poland in the past. In order to grasp the point of view of some of the actors of the festivals, I will also analyse the article authored by Mạc Việt Hồng, a pro-democratic activist and author of *Đàn Chim Việt* who described three *Tết* celebrations taking place in Warsaw. The article was adapted to the analysis as a particularly interesting material, as it is the only text in which the two described festivals are directly compared to each other.

Local school celebration – *Gala Noworoczna* in Raszyn

In previous years, the *Tết* festivals organised by Vietnamese people from Poland were limited to the events organised by the Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and official organisations.³ However, in 2014, a significant diversity could be observed in the organisation of *Tết* celebrations. This was described by the journalist Mạc Việt Hồng with the term ‘pluralisation’ (*đa nguyên*).

On Saturday, 1 February, 2014, the New Year Festival (*Gala Noworoczna*) was organised in a public primary school in Raszyn, a small town on the suburbs of Warsaw. Raszyn is situated in the proximity of the Wolka Kosowska trade centres, where many of the Vietnamese from Poland work and live (Bieniecki, Cybulska, Roguska 2008; Klorek, Szulecka 2013; Piłat 2013). It was organised by the local authorities, such as the mayor of the Raszyn community), together with the official Vietnamese organisations from Poland – the local branch of the Association of the Vietnamese in Poland, the Association of Vietnamese Women and some others.

The event took place in the large gymnasium hall situated in the school. Around 500–600 people attended, mainly school children and their families. Vietnamese people formed the majority of the participants, but around 20–30 per cent of the public were Poles, mostly local residents. The event consisted of three parts: in the first one, the organisers and honorary guests (communal authorities, head of the school, leaders of the organisations and representatives of the Embassy of Socialist Republic of Vietnam) gave official speeches on the stage. During the main part of the celebration, the audience could enjoy multiple performances of Polish and Vietnamese children, such as singing, dancing (including Vietnamese traditional dances, such as the dance of the lion and dancing with the fans) and demonstration of martial arts. The last part of the festival included food, served for free – all participants could enjoy traditional Vietnamese *Tết* dishes, such as rice cakes *bánh chưng*, steamed pancakes *bánh cuốn* and some others.

In order to analyse the content of the festival, the notion of ‘strategic essentialism’ seems particularly suitable. This concept, originally created by Spivak (Danius, Jonsson 1993; Spivak, Landry, MacLean 1995) to describe the resistance strategy adapted by some minority groups in order to face the pressure imposed on them by the unifying global culture, is used to analyse the representation strategies of minority groups during such events as ethnic festivals. It can be described as deliberate self-identification with certain stereotypical characteristics, aimed at achieving some goals, such as unproblematic acceptance by the majority society

(see Bramadat 2001: 6). The nature of the goals adapted by the official organisations is an interesting issue, which I will try to answer in the conclusion of the article.

The *Gala Noworoczna*, organised in Raszyn for the second time, was welcomed with a relatively high level of interest and involvement of the public in the event – the stage performances of the children attracted and engaged many parents. It could also be observed that the event was performed in a specific performance style, characteristic of official events organised both in contemporary Vietnam and by the official Vietnamese organisations. Celebrations held by the Embassy and official associations are routinely organised in the style of a formal ‘academia,’ which for Poles who remember the communist era inevitably recalls the ‘academias’ organised in Poland prior to 1989 in schools or enterprises. During such events, the participants perform on the stage, which is always decorated with the name and the date of the event, commonly in traditional Vietnamese festival colours: red and gold. At the beginning of the event, the organisers and invited guests deliver formal speeches. The style is rather official, not leaving much space for improvisation. Stage performances, such as singing and dancing, require the participation of all actors involved in an event – for example, Polish guests invited to the celebrations of Women’s Day or Independence Day are expected to sing a song on stage.

This kind of performance style indicates the bond maintained by the official migrant organisations with the Vietnamese state. During my fieldwork in Vietnam, while I had the opportunity to attend to a few official ‘academias’ (among them those organised by the Hanoi branch of the Association of Vietnamese in Poland), I was stunned by the similarities between the performance style of the events organised by the AVP and the formal celebrations in Vietnam. However, it is also important to notice that this strategy of organising celebrations may lead to missing the important target at which they are directed – namely, representatives of the 1.5 and 2nd generation of immigrants, the young Vietnamese brought up in Poland. When I asked my informants during my 2013 research among the Vietnamese youth whether they attended the festivals organised by the embassy, most of them claimed that they avoided going there because the events are boring, dedicated mainly to older people.

However, observing the *Tết* festival in Raszyn, I noticed that this style of organising events is somehow compatible with the expectations of another target – some representatives of the Polish majority society. To a large extent, *Gala Noworoczna* resembled the style of Polish provincial festivals, organised by local authorities or organisations. Firstly, one can easily notice the division between ‘honorary guests’ and casual guests. During the *Tết* celebration in Raszyn, the honorary guests – the main *dramatis personae* – were the representatives of the local elite: the community mayor, the head of the municipal culture centre and the head of the primary school. They were seated in an honorary place together with the members of the elite of the minority community, such as the ambassador, the head of the Vietnamese Association in Poland and the representatives of Vietnamese Woman Union and other official associations. All the VIPs were seated together during the stage performance, and during the meal they occupied a common honorary table together.

Moreover, the event was organised in a school – a place where performances organised in the style of ‘formal academia’ are still quite common. Most of the Polish participants were the parents of the schoolchildren performing on stage. This kind of festival was somehow familiar to them, resembling various celebrations presented in Polish schools.

A fancy cultural project – *Tết* celebration at the headquarters of Agora

The next day, 2 February 2014 (Sunday), another *Tết* celebration took place in Warsaw. The *Wietnam – Ba Lan Tết* Festival was organised by the Freedom of Speech Society (*Stowarzyszenie Wolnego Słowa*), a Polish NGO advocating for human rights and democracy, and the Vietnamese pro-democratic activists. It was

symptomatic that the festival was held at the headquarters of one of the most important Polish publishers, Agora, which publishes the leading Polish daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. This paper has often presented the point of view of Vietnamese pro-democratic activists, and their leader Tôn Văn Anh is a frequent guest.⁴

The *Tết* celebration, similarly to *Gala Noworoczna* in Raszyn, was to a large extent directed towards children. The central part was the *Children of the Dragon* stage performance prepared by Vietnamese and Polish children, assisted by Polish cultural activists. The show was shown previously in the *Stara Prochownia* Theatre, on 21 December 2013. The premiere was very successful, attracting many Vietnamese as well as Polish spectators. During the *Wietnam – Ba Lan Tết* celebration, other attractions for children were provided, such as a playground and the supervision of a qualified children's caregiver/entertainer.

However, the schedule of the event also included some attractions for adult and teenage participants. Spectators could enjoy performances of young artists, originating mainly from the second generation of the Vietnamese population. Attractions included a concert by the alternative band Yoda Terror (two of the musicians were of Polish–Vietnamese origin), a performance by young Vietnamese beatbox artists, a pop singer and hip-hop dancers. Due to these factors, the event was described in Mạc Việt Hồng's article as a *Tết festival of the second generation*. We should note that all the elements of the programme referred to could also appear during the *Tết* celebrations organised by the official organisations – although the presentation style of *Children of the Dragon*, leaving much space for improvisation, might not match the formalised style of the official celebration very well.

However, in the event organised at Agora there were also some elements of the programme that would be unimaginable during the 'officially approved' *Tết* festival. These aspects included presentation of the amateur documentary film *The Vietnamese*, directed by the pro-democratic activist Tôn Văn Anh, and a campaign for collecting letters of support for the Vietnamese prisoner of conscience Do Thi Minh Hanh, organised in cooperation with Amnesty International. The presence of political aspects among the predominantly cultural event was summed up by Mạc Việt Hồng with the statement: 'Culture and a bit of politics.'

The public attending the *Tết* organised at Czerska street was also distinct from the participants of the Raszyn event. Firstly, it was noticeably less numerous – around 100–150 people took part in the event. Secondly, the Vietnamese formed a minority of the spectators – although their presence in the numbers of around 40–50 people was much more noticeable than during the majority of events organised in the past by pro-democracy activists. Polish attendees prevailed, and the presence of some other foreigners, of Ukrainian or African origin, could also be noticed.

In terms of performance style, a very important feature was the lack of division between the actors of the show and the spectators, as well as between the organisers and the public, which was very visible in the case of Raszyn event. Although the performers, such as the children involved in the show and young singers and dancers, performed on a stage, after the presentations they sat together with the public, sharing their impressions and opinions concerning the event. The organisers willingly chatted with all the guests and participants. The food provided for the participants was distributed throughout the event in buffet form. Both the organisers of the event and the spectators consumed traditional dishes, such as *nem* and *bánh cuốn*, while standing in the hallway of the Agora building and discussing various issues concerning the show. The egalitarian atmosphere was compatible with the age of the participants, of whom the majority were young people, and second- and 1.5-generation Vietnamese. The age profile of the participants was noticeably distinct from the case of the *Gala Noworoczna* event, where the main three groups of participants were schoolchildren, their parents and the authorities of the Raszyn community and official Vietnamese associations.

Cultural events and integration: various styles of promoting Vietnamese culture

The ethnic festivals organised by the migrant communities in cooperation with the institutions or organisations of the host country are commonly aimed at ‘promotion of ethnic culture’ and ‘integration of the migrant community’ (Brettell, Reed-Danahay 2012). In the case of the migrant community of the Vietnamese in Poland, the aim of ‘promoting the ethnic culture’ towards the majority society is currently of growing importance, since the Vietnamese are aware of the fact that they are commonly perceived as a closed and hermetic community, in both popular discourse and scientific literature (see the title of Halik and Nowicka’s book *Vietnamese in Poland: Integration or Isolation?*). During my fieldwork performed among the Vietnamese community in Poland, I heard declarations concerning the willingness of involving Polish people in communal celebrations. For example, when I appeared in the *Tết Trung Thu* (Mid-Autumn Festival, targeted at children) organised in *Chùa Thiên Phúc* pagoda in the proximity of Raszyn together with my family, we were very warmly welcomed. The organisers of the event repeatedly claimed that they are very willing to welcome Polish people during the Vietnamese celebrations because they want to ‘integrate’ and ‘promote their culture.’

Such statements are quite characteristic for the Vietnamese residing in the Lesznów and Raszyn communities, as their presence in this previously culturally homogenous environment is often perceived as a challenge (Piłat 2013). It can justifiably be assumed that the Vietnamese are aware of the tensions that may occur due to the growing presence of the culturally diverse groups in this area and fear the discrimination that they may expect from the local residents. In the past, when the Vietnamese community was concentrated mainly in Warsaw – a metropolis of over 1 million citizens, where the presence of a foreign, non-European community was much less noticeable – the celebrations and festivals organised by the official organisations seemed to be dedicated strictly to the Vietnamese community. The Polish participants present during such events as *Tết* celebrations included only selected guests, such as representatives of the Polish–Vietnamese Friendship Association or scholars investigating the Vietnamese community.

The pro-democratic activists, on the other hand, for many years directed their activity towards the Polish audience. Tôn Văn Anh was very active in Polish media, such as *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The topics presented by the pro-democratic activists covered primarily the issues connected with violation of human rights in Vietnam and problems of irregular migrants. Tôn Văn Anh, together with Robert Krzysztoń from the Freedom of Speech Society, for many years voted for different treatment of the migrants by the Polish authorities, as according to them they should be perceived not as economic migrants, but as refugees seeking asylum from the totalitarian regime. Therefore, the activity of pro-democracy Vietnamese has for a long time been associated strictly with political actions, and not with ‘promotion of Vietnamese culture.’

Significant change came with a project co-organised by the Freedom of Speech Society, which for many years has been cooperating with Vietnamese pro-democracy activists, and the Creative Studio Society (*Stowarzyszenie Pracownia Twórcza*), named the *Interdisciplinary artistic project Vietnam – Ba Lan (Vietnam–Poland)*. The project, lasting three months, was aimed at children. Vietnamese children living in Poland were given the opportunity to participate together with their Polish peers in a series of workshops, during which they learned about Vietnamese legends and traditional stories. The final aim of the workshop was preparation of the stage performance *Children of the Dragon*, during which the children occupied not only the role of the actors, but also creators. They themselves prepared the decorations and participated in the creation of the screenplay. The project, sponsored by the municipal authorities of Warsaw, was nominated for the ‘Best project of 2013’ prize in a city-run contest. The first final of the project was held at the *Stara Prochownia* Theatre on 21 December 2013. During the *Vietnam – Ba Lan Tết* event, the play was performed for the second time.

It should be noted that the project attracted significant attention from various social circles, including the parents and families of the Vietnamese child actors, second- and 1.5 generation Vietnamese brought up in Poland, but also Polish people interested in artistic activity aiming at multiculturalism. From the point of view of the Vietnamese pro-democracy activists it was particularly important that a noticeable amount of Vietnamese people participated in the events, among them some people well known and recognised in the community.

However, the project could not be perceived as an ‘apolitical’ enterprise. As Mạc Việt Hồng aptly noted in her article, its message could be described by the phrase ‘Văn hóa và một chút chính trị’ (‘Culture and a little bit of politics’). The official organisations and the embassy boycotted the event, as they have been doing for a long time with any events undertaken by Tôn Văn Anh and her social group. The *Wietnam – Ba Lan* project was not mentioned by any official media dedicated to the issues of the community. Moreover, in private conversations, some of the participants claimed to me that they were reprimanded by the representatives of the embassy and discouraged from participating in any further events organised by the pro-democratic activists. However, it could be noticed that the trendy cultural project – including the concert of an alternative music band and the presentation of breakdancing – attracted some categories of the Vietnamese audience that were not willing to participate in the official festivals, such as representatives of the 1.5 and 2nd generations – teenagers and young people.

Conclusion: tension between maintaining the bond with the homeland and attracting the young generation of Vietnamese

Both *Tết* festivals described in the article were important events for construction of the ethnic identity of the Vietnamese migrant group as well as bearing some political meaning. Concerning the issue of identity-building, both celebrations were aimed at integration of the Vietnamese community and maintaining the culture among the young generation. The second important dimension of the process of constructing identity was promotion of Vietnamese culture outside the community in order to facilitate the integration with the majority Polish society. Comparing the two *Tết* festival events, it can be noticed that in both cases this aim was fulfilled to some extent.

The common element in both enterprises was the orientation of the festivals towards children. The presence of children was a factor that encouraged participation and played an integrative function. At both the *Gala Noworoczna* Raszyn event and the *Wietnam – Ba Lan* festival organised at the headquarters of Agora, Vietnamese and Polish children performed together on stage and ran around together playing in the corridors. Another platform facilitating integration was the food. Ethnic food is a product often used during ethnic festivals as a convenient and attractive means of promoting culture and a marker of national identity (van Esterik 1982). The Vietnamese rice cake *bánh chưng*, served during the *Tết* holiday, has gained the label of ‘iconic festive dish’ (Avieli 2005). During both festivals, Polish people were deliberating curiously about Vietnamese dishes, which were prepared in the ‘authentic’ manner and therefore significantly different from the Asian cuisine served in popular bars, asking the Vietnamese participants about the correct way of eating particular dishes.

However, in some other aspects the festivals differed significantly, each of them reaching a different kind of public – on both the Vietnamese and the Polish sides. With the Raszyn event, the vast majority of the participants originated from the local community – the Vietnamese working in the trade centres in Wólka Kosowska and their Polish neighbours. To a large extent this reflected the characteristics of the Raszyn Vietnamese community, consisting of people of working age who arrived in Poland quite recently. In the festival organised at Agora, the Vietnamese participants were mainly young people, high-school or university stu-

dents, brought up in Poland. Most of them were more fluent in Polish than in Vietnamese. Discouraged by the formal, ‘academia’ style of the official Vietnamese events, they were more willing to participate in the trendy artistic project directed by the Vietnamese pro-democratic opposition.

Moving on to the issue of the political dimension of the two festivals, it must be remembered that for both sides – the AVP and the anti-communist activists – the *Tết* festivals were also something of a battlefield in two struggles – the ‘struggle for the souls’ of the Vietnamese community, and the ‘struggle for the image’ of the community shared by the public opinion in Poland. Until recently, the pro-democratic activists seemed to fail in the first battle, being unable to gain support in the Vietnamese community – but were quite successful in the second one, presenting in the Polish media the image of the Vietnamese as oppressed by the communist regime. In the AVP, in contrast, there was a relatively high degree of support from the community – counted in the number of participants during the events organised by the official organisations – and the issue of the image of the Vietnamese in public opinion was not of significant interest to them. However, the events organised during *Tết* in 2014 prove that the pro-democratic activists – cooperating with Polish artists and cultural activists – may have a better offer for an important segment of Vietnamese community in Poland – the representatives of the second and 1.5 generations.

The political goals standing behind this ‘struggle for souls’ are quite obvious in the case of the pro-democratic activists: they are trying to engage the audience – of Polish origin, but also (and probably more importantly) of Vietnamese origin – in the fight to introduce democracy and political pluralism in Vietnam. Such goals obviously stand in tension with the policy of official organisations. Although such events as *Gala Noworoczna* in Raszyn seem to have no connections with the issue of the political system of contemporary Vietnam, it should be remembered that the strategy of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak *et al.* 1995) adopted by the AVP, based on presenting ‘only the culture and no politics,’ also contributes to creating a specific image of the Vietnamese. The activity of official organisations, who maintain strong ties with the home country, follows the line of the Vietnamese state policy, and is directed to making use of the economic benefits provided by the immigrants, such as remittances. Therefore, it is aimed at creating an image of an unproblematic and harmonious community, attached to ‘traditional Vietnamese culture’ and national values, but at the same time unthreatening to the Polish majority society. This image helps to fulfill the basic goal of the Vietnamese state: ensuring that the migrants are the source of economic benefits for the home country and at the same time pose no danger towards the political system of Vietnam.

What seems particularly important is the fact that the example of the two *Tết* festivals proves the relevance of the thesis concerning the importance of diaspora politics in the contemporary world (Scheffer 2003; Vertovec 2005). In the territory of the Republic of Poland, the official migrant organisations, transnationally bound with the state institutions of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, implementing the policy of the Vietnamese government towards the emigrants, play an important role in shaping the integration patterns of the Vietnamese. The activity of the AVP is contested by another transnationally connected actor: pro-democratic activists, who use the model of the American Vietnamese diaspora as a basic point of reference for the Vietnamese residing in Poland. The different nature of transnational connections results in the different performance strategies chosen in the case of the *Wietnam – Ba Lan Tết* Festival and the *Gala Noworoczna* in Raszyn, which influences the reception of both events among both Polish and Vietnamese people. The formal, official style, applied by the AVP due to its high commitment and direct involvement in cooperation with the Vietnamese authorities, may discourage many of the young audience – including the young generation of Vietnamese.

The tension between the demand to present an attractive message for the young audience brought up in Poland and the obligation to remain in the framework created by the formal, officially approved style of presentation was visible during another cultural event which I observed during my fieldwork – the *Lúa Viet*

festival. This celebration, organised for the second time in April 2014, was an event directed strictly towards the Vietnamese youth. However, due to the choice of performance strategies typical of formal events organised in Vietnam – a contest of knowledge, evaluated by a jury consisting of Vietnamese officials – the event mainly reached Vietnamese students who had recently arrived in Poland in order to study. The representatives of the 1.5 and second generations were involved to a small extent. The Vietnamese youth brought up in Poland commonly experience significant identity dilemmas, balancing between adapting the Polish or Vietnamese self-identification and value system (Grabowska 2005; Szymańska 2006; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2007). When what the official Vietnamese organisations offer culturally proves inadequate for them, they may either completely lose interest in participating in ethnic shows or turn towards events organised by the pro-democratic activists. In that case, the choices taken by the Vietnamese youth – concerning the sphere of leisure and motivated by aesthetic factors – will also have a political meaning, proving the importance of ethnic festivals as an expression of diaspora politics.

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Notes

¹ Concerning the issue of occupational diversity of the Vietnamese community, see the results of the Centre of Migration Research Survey: Górny, Grzymała-Kazłowska, Kępińska, Fihel, Piekut (2007), Kaczmarczyk, Okólski (eds) (2008).

² In the year 2008, pro-democratic activists organised a photography exhibition presenting the lives of Vietnamese people in Poland, entitled *Warsaw's Little Saigon*. The title of the exhibition refers to 'Little Saigons' – Vietnamese enclaves in American cities. Usage of the name of the former capital of Southern Vietnam may seem strange given the fact that most of the migrants living in Poland originate from Northern Vietnam and do not feel attached to the former Republic of Vietnam. Similarly, members of the pro-democratic opposition commonly use a yellow flag with three red stripes (the flag of former Southern Vietnam), i.e. in films directed by opposition members or during public exhibitions. For discussion concerning the symbolic meaning and political context of usage of the two Vietnamese flags, see Le (2012).

³ A few years ago (in 2009, 2010 and 2011), the Polish NGO 'Arteria' organised some celebrations connected with the *Tết* holiday. They were organised in the form of a club party or disco, aimed mainly at young people. The Vietnamese involved in organisation of the events were a few representatives of the 1.5 generation of migrants, and the vast majority of participants were Polish people. Due to the narrow target and weak participation of the Vietnamese community, I decided not to include these events in the category of 'ethnic festival.'

⁴ Analysis of the online archive of *Gazeta Wyborcza* indicates that Tôn Văn Anh was mentioned in over 40 articles published in the paper, dating from 2003 until 2014. See: <http://www.archiwum.wyborcza.pl/archiwum/tag/ton+van+anh?ktory=3&orderByDate=1>.

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