

## BOOK REVIEW

# “UnSichtbar. Vietnamesisch-Deutsche Wirklichkeiten”

## “InVisible. Vietnamese-German realities.” *Of the diversity of Vietnamese immigration to Germany*

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**Abstract:** *This scientific anthology about the past and present of Vietnamese immigration in East Germany and West Germany is the first of its kind. The editorial team of the Documentation Centre and Museum of Immigration in Germany (DOMiD) worked in collaboration with the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation to depict the diversity of Vietnamese immigration to and in Germany. The anthology covers a range of interdisciplinary contributions and provides space for oral history contributions that live up to the diversity of Vietnamese-German realities.*

**Keywords:** *Vietnamese immigration and re-migration, oral history, intercultural education and upbringing, transcultural psychology, transnational networks*

For some the keyword “Vietnam“ evokes in their mind’s eye horrible images of the Vietnam War, while others draw up picturesque bays, green fields of rice and white sandy beaches. And at some point, the view turns towards the Vietnam which is part of the history of a once divided Germany. May it be, the immigration of Vietnamese refugees (“boat people”) after Vietnam War to West Germany and the recruitment of Vietnamese contract workers to the former GDR in the 1980s. Or the much praised Vietnamese pupils who are being regarded as the figurehead of successful integration.

The editors of “UnSichtbar”, third anthology from the “Edition DOMiD – Migration im Fokus” line, aim to depict the disregarded immigration history and current reality of more than 176,000 people of Vietnamese descent in Germany. Being a scientific anthology, it contains academic contributions from the humanities, natural and social science. Additionally, the

book gives space to oral history contributions of former “boat people”, contract workers and re-migrants. This combination allows readers with little previous knowledge to gain quick access to the issues put forth. Because of the broad spectrum of topics, I will focus on four outstanding articles which deal with the experience of discrimination and racism, education and upbringing and with psychotherapeutic care for Vietnamese immigrants.

In honor of the 25th memorial day of the pogrom of Rostock-Lichtenhagen, where a house for asylum seekers, inhabited solely by Vietnamese, was set on fire, the theatre director and writer Đan Thy Nguyễn (“Das Sonnenblumenhaus”) aims at coming to terms with the horrors of the past from a Vietnamese point of view. In his article “Far-right violence, the GDR and the Reunion” he reflects on continuities of far-right violence. He pleads for settling with history and an active remembrance culture, which has not yet taken place in politics or the

Vietnamese community adequately.

Diametrically to the experiences of discrimination in the aftermath of the German reunification, Aladin El-Mafaalani’s – Professor for Sociology – and Thomas Kemper’s article “Educational success despite unfavourable conditions” illuminates the current perception of Vietnamese pupils as a “model minority”. Using official statistics and the current state of national and international research, they document the outstanding educational success of Vietnamese pupils in the German education system: The numbers of Vietnamese pupils attending the grammar school (“Gymnasium”) and finishing it with an university-entrance diploma (“Abitur”) is even higher than that of German pupils without an immigration background. They do so despite empirically proven social and economic risk factors, that should normally adverse educational success. The article can’t answer the question of what conditions exactly lead to

the “Asian miracle”. But it does show possible explanatory indicators that are yet to be researched and elicits research desiderata whether the educational success continues in the tertiary education sector and the phase of starting professional careers.

The issue of intergenerational conflicts as a result of migration-related experiences is brought into focus by Birgitt Röttger-Rössler - Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology - in her article “Germans with parents from Vietnam”. She writes that on the one hand, the educational success of Vietnamese pupils is being rated as consistently positive throughout society, but on the other hand, it is barely known what intergenerational conflicts the education gap and language barriers leaves in the parent-child relationships. The generation of children, driven by their parental zeal for education, has meanwhile arrived in the German education system and in local society. The generation of parents instead, still struggle with the German language and customs and entirely depend on the communication skills of their children. The traditional Confucian-influenced parent-child role is interchanged in the integration process. It collides with the strict hierarchical principle of seniority, according to which, younger people are obliged to obey their elders completely. The perseverance of traditional patterns of parental behavior no longer aligns with life in Germany such that family conflicts seem inevitable. These affective distances of parent-child relationships may lead to mental stress disorders, which can threaten and shatter families. The establishment of intra-familial dialogues is proposed here as a solution for the rapprochement between the generations. These mental stress disorders often can't be resolved without professional support, but many immigrants will only have a little access to culturally sensitive counseling and therapy services due to lack of adequate language skills. This psychotherapeutic and psychosocial care gap is addressed in the article “Mental stress disorders, support and treatment options for Vietnamese immigrants in Berlin” by



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Vietnamese contract workers before leaving for the GDR, at Nội Bài airport, Hà Nội, 1988.

the medical team of Eric Hahn and Minh Tâm Tạ and their research group. Even after many years in Germany, Vietnamese immigrants are influenced by the stigmatization of mental stress disorders in their culture of origin. Unfavourable factors for mental stress disorders are the loss of protective social capital, a lack of knowledge of the German language or experiences of discrimination.

The article gives insight into the work of the psychiatric-psychotherapeutic network for the “Mental Health for Vietnamese Immigrants” in Berlin, which has built up a unique language- and culture-sensitive offer in Germany. The illustrated case studies and presentations of the various treatment options represent an attempt by the team to counteract the stigmatization of mental stress disorders in the Vietnamese-German community.

### Conclusion

The strength, and at the same time potential weakness, of this anthology lies in the thematic breadth. The contributions are schematized in three thematic blocks: the immigration to West Germany, the immigration to East Germany or to the former GDR and a “residual area” of other topics. If one considers the content density,

each of the three blocks would have deserved its own anthology, while at the same time, the interdisciplinary approach, from a variety of perspectives, is the strength of this project. The anthology provides a scientific platform to come to terms with the intertwining of Vietnamese immigration and the East and West German history.

Recommended not only for an academic, but also for those attempting to look behind the facade of common stereotypes which situate Vietnamese as a homogenous community between small-scale ethnic business ownerships and model pupil existence. The voices in this book are a chorus that resound with the diversity of Vietnamese communities.

### Bibliographic information

*Kocaturk-Schuster, Bengji; Kolb, Arnd; Thanh Long; Schultze, Günther & Wölck, Sascha (eds.) (2017). UnSichtbar: Vietnamesisch-Deutsche Wirklichkeiten. Edition DOMiD - Migration im Fokus, Vol. 3, 370 pages. ISBN: 978-3-9816133-3-9*  
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