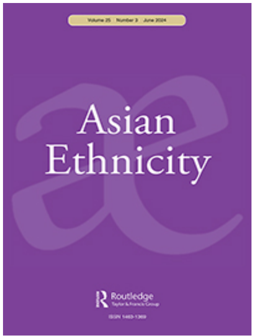

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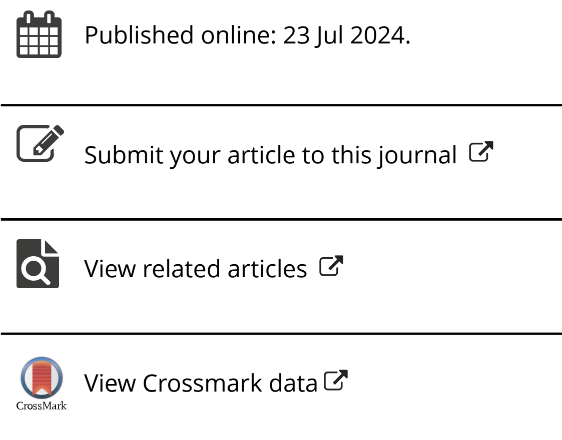

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An ethnographic study of Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity

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ABSTRACT
Vietnamese Ukrainians are a largely unstudied identity group that has recently attracted attention due to the impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Our study examines Vietnamese-Ukrainian bicultural identity as experienced by 10 university student refugees of the war in 2022–23. Researchers conducted semi-structured ethnographic interviews in which each participant examined identity formation experiences as second-generation Vietnamese Ukrainians. Participants also reflected upon the impacts to ethnic identity self-awareness that resulted from their unexpected return migration to Vietnam as student refugees of war. The cohort of study participants created a tight-knit Vietnamese-Ukrainian return diaspora in an environment conducive to self-reflection and exploration of their ongoing ethnic identity journeys. In our study, we argue that the ethnic identity formation of young Vietnamese Ukrainians relies on the active construction of intercultural personhood as an adaptation to transnational mobility and change.

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Vietnamese studies; Ukrainian studies; ethnography; ethnic identity; intercultural personhood

Introduction

This study of Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity belongs to a growing body of academic research devoted to the so-called *Việt Kiều* (Overseas Vietnamese), their patterns of transnational migration, diaspora culture, and identity formation. By employing the term 'transnational,' our work emphasizes the cultural links and social interactions impacting identity formation as Vietnamese Ukrainians move physically across national borders, navigating the stresses and challenges to their collective and individual sense of self. And by investigating self-narratives of a Vietnamese transnational community, our study contributes to a more complex understanding of the global Vietnamese experience of identity.

Following the lead of an extensive body of scholarship devoted to the Vietnamese diaspora, we understand diaspora to be a community of people sharing a common identity who consider home and homeland to exist for them in more than one location, and who have a shared life experience and family history of migration between those locations. Vietnamese diaspora studies predominantly focus on communities in North America, Europe, and Australia and center migrant and diaspora experience on the traumatic or lingering post-traumatic impact of the American-Vietnamese War. An

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alternative trend in the scholarship examines the return migration of diasporic communities to Vietnam as the result of economic growth since the *Đổi Mới* reforms introduced in 1986. By turning to the post-Soviet nation of Ukraine, our study upends both these trends and explores their inverse: we examine an overseas Vietnamese diaspora community composed of students, labor migrants, and their children, and we explore their return migration to Vietnam as refugees of war.

Our study of Vietnamese-Ukrainian transnational identity belongs to an emerging area of research focused on Vietnamese diaspora communities in the post-socialist nations of the former Soviet Bloc. In the 1950s, future cadres of the Vietnamese Communist Party were first invited to study in the USSR, while temporary contract laborers from Vietnam began arriving in the 1970s. As studies have shown, the distinctive 'pathways of socialist migration' became particularly robust in the 1980s when the flow of Vietnamese students and contract laborers to and from the region greatly increased into the tens of thousands annually.[1] Several of our study participants spoke of parents and grandparents who arrived in the USSR during this aspirational period. The Vietnamese migrant laborers and students, however, formed temporary communities in the USSR at this time, as they were expected to return to their home country to participate in its socialist construction.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Vietnamese migrants were beset with the sudden annulment of socialist-era labor contracts, a precarious legal status, corrupt policing, ineffective bureaucracies, rising xenophobia, and the extreme economic uncertainties of the chaotic transition to neoliberalism. Despite these challenges, tens of thousands of Vietnamese remained in the region, often due to personal and economic factors, and formed what has been called an 'unintended diaspora.'[2] Our study follows a path different from the scholarly trend of depicting the constricted, subaltern lives of Vietnamese migrant communities in the socialist successor states.[3] We situate our findings in scholarship emphasizing the agency of the Vietnamese diaspora communities in Eastern Europe, including the former Soviet Union – their immigrant success stories, efforts at community building, and active identity formation. To cite the almost mythological Vietnamese migrant success story from this period, Vietnam's first billionaire Phạm Nhật Vượng, after graduating from the Moscow Geological Prospecting Institute in 1992, moved to Kharkiv where he founded the successful instant noodle company Technocom, which he sold to the Nestlé corporation in 2009 for $150 million before returning to Vietnam. The parents of our Vietnamese-Ukrainian research cohort arrived in Ukraine largely in the 1990s and their stories, as relayed in the interviews of their children, provide evidence of an intentional narrative of Vietnamese diaspora life in post-Soviet Ukraine. Thousands of Vietnamese chose to call Ukraine their home: open pathways to Ukrainian citizenship contributed to the growth of thriving Vietnamese enclaves within most major cities, notably in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odessa. The Ukraine-Vietnam Association in Kyiv estimates the population of Vietnamese in Ukraine at 100,000 prior to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022.[4]

Most members of our research cohort were either born in Ukraine or arrived from Vietnam as children in the early 2000s – a full decade after Ukrainian independence in 1991. In interviews, they shared how they negotiated their emerging sense of Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity within the rich multiethnic and multilingual tapestry of modern-day Ukraine. We understand ethnicity as a group identity constructed upon

shared characteristics such as national origin, language, and cultural traditions. All the participants of our study identify as belonging to two ethnic groups: Vietnamese primarily on the basis of national origin, parentage, traditions, values, and language, and Ukrainian on the basis of birthplace, upbringing, formal education, sense of belonging, language, and in their own words 'mentality,' mindset or shared psychology. All the study participants were also dual Vietnam-Ukraine citizens though in some cases with lapsed or missing Vietnam identity documents – which further contributed to their sense of dual ethnicity and national belonging.

To better illuminate the context in which our research participants claimed Ukrainian as an ethnic identity, we briefly turn to Soviet era history. It has been argued that the Soviet state approached ethnic identity by following two contradictory trends simultaneously: on the one hand, modernizing assimilation as the goal of anti-racist, communist internationalism; and on the other, primordial nationalism in the creation of ethnic republics and autonomous regions in the USSR.[5] Ethnologist Viktor Shnirelman, while explaining this contradiction, further argues that the category of ethnicity (*etnos*) supplanted that of race in Soviet and post-Soviet ideology:

> Whereas racial theory associated the fate of both a person and an entire people with race, this fate was mainly a function of ethnicity in the Soviet social practice. Yet, this was veiled by an official internationalism. The Soviet media espoused an anti-racist and anticolonial attitude.[6]

Bureaucratically, every Soviet citizen was assigned an ethnic, rather than racial, identity category in official internal passports and identity documents. The contradictions embedded in the Soviet approach to national, racial, and ethnic identity were inherited by the post-Soviet successor states: although each new state bore a name associated with an individual ethnic group, elements of which had long harbored dreams of an independent nation-state or ethnic homeland. The post-Soviet successor state Ukraine, for instance, offered citizenship, equal rights, and a civic Ukrainian identity irrespective of ethnic origin. In this way, Ukrainian identity has come to signify simultaneously both an ethnic identity traditionally understood and an inclusive, pluralistic civic or national identity. It is in this social and political context that our research subjects as children of Vietnamese migrants in Ukraine would claim Ukrainian identity as one of their two ethnic identities.

Focusing briefly here on language usage, most members of our research cohort consider Russian to be their first language. They are almost all quadrilingual, speaking Russian, Ukrainian, English, and Vietnamese. Although Ukrainian is the official language of Ukraine, spoken by more than 80% of the population in their personal life, more than 33% claim Russian as a primary language. As socio-linguistic research in Ukraine before 2022 has shown, most Ukrainians code-mix Russian and Ukrainian in their everyday speech, and those who speak Russian primarily or exclusively do not find that language usage detracts significantly from their sense of belonging to Ukraine.[7]

The participants in our study forged their bicultural Vietnamese-Ukrainian ethnic identity within the rich transnational history and present-day reality of diverse ethnic communities constituting the heterogeneous society of Ukraine. Historians characterize Ukraine's diversity as the product of its long history as a transnational cultural crossroads connecting Europe and Eurasia as well as

a region colonized and dominated by neighboring empire states. 'Ukrainian culture always existed in a space shared with other cultures,' writes historian Serhii Plokhy, 'The ability of Ukrainian society to cross inner and outer frontiers and negotiate identities created by them constitutes the main characteristic of the history of Ukraine . . . .'[8] In keeping with this tradition, our research cohort found that Ukrainian friends and associates provided a welcoming space encouraging their cross-cultural navigation of Ukrainian identity. Displaying their ability to effectively navigate multiple Ukrainian cross-cultural frontiers, our research subjects adapted and assimilated to the inclusive Ukrainian multiculture, developing transferable skills that they would utilize as student refugees in Vietnam where they felt compelled to re-navigate the ethnic and national frontiers of their Vietnamese identity in 2022–3.

Our research cohort also demonstrated how the legacy of late Soviet popular culture continues to inform ethnic identity perceptions in modern-day Ukraine. Steven Lee's study of the immensely popular Korean-Russian rock star Viktor Tsoi makes the case for Tsoi as the premier post-racial/post-ethnic Soviet cultural icon of the 1980s.[9] In the late 2000s and 2010s, our research participants found an analogous ethnic-blind onramp to post-modern/post-Soviet Ukrainian identity which they eagerly embraced, while friends and associates sometimes erased their Vietnamese identity in earnest attempts at inclusivity. Vitaly Kim, a Ukrainian citizen of Korean descent serving as governor of Mykolaiv become a national media sensation symbolizing Ukrainian patriotic resistance in the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022 and can be cited here as another contemporary example of this enduring trend.[10] But Tsoi also did not shy away from playing stereotyped roles promoting racial and ethnic essentialist tropes in his film and television acting career. When speaking of Vietnamese identity, our research subjects also sometimes invoked essentialist tropes or passively accepted their Vietnamese ethnic identity as an ascription-based primordial feature of biology and genetics.

As student refugees in Vietnam, our research cohort was shocked to learn that Vietnamese society observed unwritten rules for recognizing Vietnamese identity and national belonging that did not comport with their earlier experience of a blended ethnic/civic Ukrainian identity in Ukraine. This revelation led them to reformulate bicultural Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity as an adjustment and transition to their new transnational reality, a reality in which the concepts of ethnicity and national belonging, home and homeland took on new meanings – stressing and challenging their previous assumptions. Our study's main argument is that the complex historical, social, and political environments experienced by the Vietnamese-Ukrainian research cohort, as children and young adults in Ukraine, as Russo-Ukrainian War refugees in Europe and Vietnam, and as students and return migrants in Vietnam produced unique forms of identity stress. Such stresses catalyzed participant cross-cultural adaptation, identity achievement, and the articulation of a truly transnational and globalized intercultural personhood embodied in an emergent model of Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity. The transnational model of bicultural identity achievement communicated in the ethnographic interviews of our subjects supersedes the previous approach of post-Soviet identity achievement that they had developed as children and young adults in Ukraine before the War.

Methods

From January to June 2023, study leaders conducted ethnographic interviews in Hanoi with each of the 10-member Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity research cohort. Our approach is ethnographic in that it relies on both participant observation and semi-structured interviews, as well as established techniques used in ethnography to code and interpret the data. The participant observation happened naturally, because two of the co-authors are educators trained in ethnographic methods and interacted with the subjects in various informal and formal social settings, while speaking a mix of languages: English, Russian, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese. Two of the co-authors are students/recent graduates, who are themselves Vietnamese Ukrainians with a lifetime of informal participant observations on which to draw. This makes the study in part auto-ethnographic, in that two of the study authors are writing about their own cultures. Prior to carrying out the study, the two senior co-authors provided the two junior co-authors with training in ethnographic methods, e.g. how to construct, conduct and code interviews, how to recruit study subjects, and some conceptual tools for analyzing cultures.

The study prompted participants to examine their evolving awareness of ethnic identity and focused discussions on childhood and young adult experiences in Ukraine prior to 2022, journeys from Ukraine as refugees of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, and their recent experiences in Vietnam in 2022–23. The interviewers prompted each member of the Vietnamese-Ukrainian cohort to articulate personal definitions of ethnic identity, an understanding of how Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity has evolved over time and currently informs their life. The interviews for this study were 1–2 hours in length and in some cases were followed up during the six-month period of study by additional interviews in person or in writing when clarifications were needed, or additional information had arisen. The interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in Russian. The research team included faculty members recognized as experts in anthropology and linguistics, qualitative research methods, and Russian, East European, and Eurasian Area Studies in addition to students proficient in Vietnamese, Ukrainian, Russian, and English. Our study is fully anonymized – each participant received an alias that appears in all data collection documents and the write-up. Original data are stored on a secure server that is password protected, allowing access only by the research team. The study received approval from the Research Ethics Board of VinUniversity in Autumn 2022.

While remaining cognizant of Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, we turned to studies of Vietnamese diaspora identity formation in the US, Europe, and Australia for relevant approaches. We follow the lead of colleagues seeking nuanced results through qualitative methods: in one study of Vietnamese-American identity, for example, researchers conducted focus groups and individualized semi-structured interviews with adolescent participants.[11] A study of Vietnamese-British identity examines the complex social and personal navigations of twenty-eight 17–34-year-olds through similar methods.[12] And a recent study of Vietnamese-Australian identity casts interviews as oral history documents interweaving personal stories with the shared narratives of Vietnamese migration and diaspora experience.[13] We also considered current research on second-generation return journeys to ancestral homelands. Researchers have attributed the higher rates of Vietnamese return migration in

the last decades primarily to the nation's fast-growing, increasingly globalized economy. Several studies, however, have characterized second-generation *Việt Kiều* as a 'lost generation' journeying to Vietnam on a personal quest for a more authentic Vietnamese identity.[14] For an exemplar of the journeys that shape identity approach focused on university students, we turned to a study of Ethiopian-Israeli education students whose academic program took them on an extended field trip to Ethiopia. The researchers completed the qualitative narrative study by conducting interviews that led participants to a 'comparison, confrontation, and questioning of their belonging as mechanisms whereby [they] shape their identities.'[15]

While the members of our research cohort are beneficiaries of globalized student mobility that facilitates pedagogic journeys of identity formation, they are also student refugees of the Russo-Ukrainian War, responsible, by one estimate, for more than five million displaced persons worldwide in 2022.[16] In interviews, each participant traced the evolution of their identity journey and negotiated the impact of the changing contexts on their ethnic self-understanding. They also confronted their shifting sense of belonging and grappled with the definitions of homeland and hostland (sometimes referred to as second homeland or *drugaya rodina*) in both Ukrainian and Vietnamese contexts. Such research helps to contextualize the experience of our research cohort and elucidates its significance within the increasingly complex and multicultural tapestry of transnational Vietnamese communities.

To add theoretical structure to our study, we turned to the established paradigms of Phinney's ethnic identity development model and Kim's intercultural identity developmental model, an integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation.[17] Each of these models defines pathways for personal development and identity awareness that inform our analysis of the ethnographic interview data. As our study reflects not merely a point in time, but a historically longitudinal approach based on information provided by participants in present-day ethnographic interviews, we developed the following structure corresponding to our participants' shared life experience:

(1) Vietnamese and Ukrainian: Unexamined Bicultural Identity in Early Childhood
(2) The Search for Ukrainian Identity: Stress and Adaptation in Ukraine
(3) The Russo-Ukrainian War and Identity Trauma
(4) The Search for Vietnamese Identity: Stress and Adaptation in Vietnam
(5) Vietnamese-Ukrainian Intercultural Personhood and Future Growth

Despite social challenges, our cohort articulated a strong sense of their bicultural Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity in addition to successful assimilation and personal belonging within the pluralistic Ukrainian society. The trauma and displacement of war, however, added an unexpected twist in their narratives of identity and self-understanding. Our research group found an uncanny symmetry in their family migration stories: the economic aftermath of the US-Vietnam War had largely been responsible for their parents' decision to migrate to the former Soviet Union and Ukraine, and now the Russo-Ukrainian War was the primary motivation for their return migration to Vietnam as second-generation Vietnamese Ukrainians. Return migration, even if only perceived as temporary, provided an unplanned-for homecoming that renewed ethnic identity exploration.

While our research cohort included one member of biracial heritage (with a Vietnamese parent and a Ukrainian parent), all others were children of two Vietnamese immigrant parents. Seven participants trace their family heritage to Northern Vietnam, one to Central Vietnam, and two to Southern Vietnam. All have extended family or relatives currently residing in Vietnam, and the parents of all but one of our cohort have recently returned to Vietnam as well. Our participants represent a range of socio-economic experiences, including those whose parents completed university in the former USSR and its successor states or held jobs typical of immigrant laborers. A subset of the latter category of parents has worked their way into the service industry, small business, or white-collar professions. Irrespective of their parents' educational and professional attainments, all participants either have recently completed or are currently completing university degrees. Although a few of our subjects lived in Vietnamese-majority neighborhoods, most resided in working-class, urban or semi-urban housing amongst primarily ethnic Ukrainians of European ancestry. These neighborhoods were not segregated, as Ukraine is a multi-ethnic society. Some of our subjects had exposure to other ethnic minority groups as children, and all did so as university students.

Results (findings)

Vietnamese and Ukrainian – unexamined bicultural identity in early childhood

Maria was born in Kharkiv, where her Vietnamese parents arrived from Ho Chi Minh City in the early 1990s as economic migrants seeking work in the local textile industry. They met other immigrants at work, formed a community, and followed the lead of friends by later seeking self-employment, selling T-shirts at the Barabashova market. Over the decades, they maintained strong ties with relatives in Vietnam. After the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, they returned to Ho Chi Minh City, just as Maria was about to begin her undergraduate studies at a local university there and found work as rental agents in a local property business. Maria reports that her parents miss their work in Ukraine and hope to return when the war ends. Her parents continue to struggle with their daughter over issues of her ethnic identity, including their notions of proper Vietnamese behavior for young women that would require her to dress more conservatively, behave more respectfully toward men and elders, and grow long hair. Maria recalls a traumatic moment in childhood when she returned home for the first time with short hair, only to be berated by her father, who sought to end her ideas about bicultural identity by criticizing his daughter's practice of bicultural naming: 'You are not Maria, you are Phương!' Her father insisted that her identity lies in her given Vietnamese name Phương, who would be expected to have long hair, and not in her adopted Ukrainian name Maria, who might sport short hair. While Maria has claimed a bicultural Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity since childhood, including two given names, the use of each which is language- and context-dependent, her parents continue to reinforce the idea that she is exclusively Vietnamese.

In their earliest childhood study participants report embracing both Vietnamese and Ukrainian identity equally as their own. Maria, for example, articulates a sentiment

typical of the student research cohort – she strongly identifies as both Ukrainian and Vietnamese, even though both her parents are Vietnamese migrants to Ukraine.

- Do you identify yourself as Ukrainian or Vietnamese? Why?
- I believe it is possible to be both Vietnamese and Ukrainian. Most of my childhood I spent with a nanny, I went to Ukrainian school, so naturally, I am quite exposed to Ukrainian culture. However, I cannot deny my Vietnamese roots. I grew up celebrating holidays of both cultures, eating both Ukrainian and Vietnamese dishes. I respect and love both nations, so I cannot choose one.

She utilizes a commonly accepted framework of ethnic identity that emphasizes culture, tradition, food, language, and shared psychology (or 'mentality'), and she does not recognize a hierarchy of ethnic identities. Her account provides a compelling example of the unexamined phase of ethnic identity development[18] as applied to two ethnic identities that were accepted unquestioningly and embraced simultaneously in early childhood. As one participant put it, 'It's amazing to me that two different cultures can co-exist in one person.'

Study participants highlighted the role of parents in actively communicating elements of an ascription-based Vietnamese identity by trying to persuade them of the authenticity of their Vietnamese identity as members of the Vietnamese diaspora born in Ukraine. The interviews of our subjects revealed that they accepted their bicultural identity despite facing strong messaging from their parents since childhood. As a child, Natasha lived in what she called the 'Vietnamese ghetto' of Kharkiv – the KhTZ, an acronym for the Kharkiv Tractor Factory District. Natasha avoided socializing with other Vietnamese children, and this raised the suspicions of her parents who repeatedly instructed her to identify only as Vietnamese: 'My parents think that I am 100% Vietnamese, that roots are roots, and there is nothing you can do to change that fact.' Kostya also reported a difference of opinion with his parents on the issue of his ethnic identity: His parents came to Kyiv as migrant laborers in the 1990s, acquired dual Ukrainian and Vietnamese citizenship, while maintaining strong ties with relatives in Hanoi and Da Nang: 'My parents drilled the idea into my head that I am Vietnamese and must marry a Vietnamese woman.'

Although the research group agreed that they learned important elements of Vietnamese ethnic identity from their parents – language, rituals like celebrating the Vietnamese Tet Lunar New Year, family values, culinary traditions like eating *phở* and other Vietnamese dishes, and the need to apply oneself assiduously to studies and work, they did not accept that Vietnamese identity was exclusive and could not coexist with other ethnic identities in a single person. Student interviewees claimed that their bicultural approach to Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity resulted from interacting, alternately, with two sources in earliest childhood. Vanya, for example, asserted 'My parents' influence contributes only 50% to who I am.' Participants relayed the twin stories of Vietnamese identity transmission from parents and Ukrainian identity transmission from nanny caregivers, whom post-Soviet migrant laborers typically employ to mind their children during long working hours.[19]

In interviews, students called their Ukrainian nanny a replacement grandmother or third parent and reported having spent entire days with the nanny and only

evenings with their parents. Many considered their nanny as a member of an extended family and continued to visit her regularly, years after having left her care. In this familial role, the nanny reputedly transmitted the foundational aspects of Ukrainian identity: how to speak Ukrainian or Russian, how to participate in Ukrainian rituals and traditions, how to appreciate Ukrainian food, and how to function as a fully accepted member of a Ukrainian family. The nanny played a spiritual role, symbolically christening Vietnamese children with an Orthodox Christian Slavic name that most continue to use in their everyday lives. Other study participants, however, reported their decision to adopt a self-selected Slavic name as a means of easing their social interactions when speaking Ukrainian, Russian, or English and used their Vietnamese name at home. Maria recalled that her nanny taught her to pray to the Christian God at bedtime and that she unquestioningly continued this ritual in her parents' Buddhist household. The nanny was also seen as a key figure for introducing our subjects to the fabric of Ukrainian social life, providing in-depth exposure and hands-on experience of life outside their Vietnamese migrant homes. Anatol recalls being taken to his nanny's summer home (*dacha*) and participating in culturally symbolic activities:

> I often went to their family summer home. I could plant potatoes there! It was like they gave me the total Ukrainian experience – grilling *shashliks*, running around with the dogs and cats, doing gardening. Yeah, I had both a Ukrainian experience and a Vietnamese experience.

Anatol conveys how the two cultural spheres of ethnic experience coexisted in his early childhood, implying that each contributed equally to his bicultural identity.

Study participants reported that they had very early in life internalized both Ukrainian and Vietnamese ethnic identities without strictly separating, hierarchizing, or otherwise examining their co-existence, while rejecting the notion of an exclusively monocultural, ascription-based Vietnamese identity. Their ethnographic interviews relate the active acceptance of two ethnic identities simultaneously as the result of extensive cultural communication with Vietnamese parents and Ukrainian caregivers – commonly reported pathways toward the acquisition of the constituent parts of their bicultural ethnic identity. The ethnic identity journey narratives of second-generation Vietnamese Ukrainians share this common origin story about bicultural identity formation.

The search for Ukrainian identity: stress and adaptation in Ukraine

Childhood bullying presented each study participant with a major stress to ethnic self-identity, leading to alienation, confusion, and self-doubt. Vietnamese-Ukrainian study participants recalled their first exposure to negative racial attitudes as a key turning point in the personal narratives of their ethnic identity journey when they responded to this stress to their heretofore unexamined ethnic identity with cross-cultural adaptation. In interviews, they recount adaptation strategies reflecting their understanding of Ukrainian identity as a social construction, learned behavior, and acquired subjectivity. This awareness aligns with postmodern theories arguing that identities are not passively transmitted through heritage or genetics but actively constructed by individuals performing them in social acts, behavior, and speech.

Our study participants, moreover, approached Ukrainian identity as a distinctive subjectivity – what they called 'Ukrainian mentality' – which they learned or acquired through cultural immersion.

Study participants often recall a precise moment in childhood when they first received a major identity shock. For example, Katya, whose parents arrived in the Soviet Union from Vietnam in the 1980s and had achieved success in Ukraine, so much so that they paid for their daughter to attend a private elementary school in Odessa. Katya, born in Odessa in the early 2000s, recalls easily fitting into the multicultural environment of the school, but after enrolling in a far less culturally heterogeneous public school in the fourth grade, she quickly realized that the Ukrainian children there regularly distinguished her race and ethnicity negatively as different from their own. She had not previously been aware of racial categories until other children had rudely informed her of their existence: 'I hadn't known that there was a difference between Asians and Whites, any difference in races at all . . . . I came to understand that I was completely different on the outside from the other children.' Recalling a similar experience, Sonya expressed identity shock as the loss of her former self: ' . . . you can't be who you thought you really were anywhere, you've been turned into an ugly duckling.' Other subjects conveyed childhood experiences ranging from racist remarks received by strangers to being beaten up by young thugs when out in public, and their initial shock at being teased, bullied, and harassed because of their perceived difference.

One study participant who recounted stress and adaptation to his ethnic identity as an adolescent in Ukraine was Petro, born in Kharkiv in the early 2000s. His father had arrived from Hanoi during the late Soviet period to pursue mining engineering studies at a university in eastern Ukraine, where he met and married Petro's mother, a local Ukrainian student born in the Dnepropetrovsk Region. As a biracial child, Petro recalls that he faced little, if any, bullying and discrimination while in cosmopolitan urbanized environments, like Kharkiv. His father's work in the mining industry, however, required the family to move periodically from place to place, at times distant from major urban centers. Petro recalls:

> When we moved to a small town where there weren't any foreigners living at all, people, especially other children, immediately set me apart from everyone else. They noticed that I wasn't like them, and this seemed rather odd to me. Especially as I was a child [adolescent] . . . . No one had ever explained this to me before. My parents had never told me that I was in any way different from other children.

He endured taunting, name calling, racial slurs, and exclusion from group social activities. Petro, who is light complexioned and often passes as European, for example, in Vietnam, recalls developing an adolescent strategy to draw attention away from his physical appearance and toward his Ukrainian behavior: 'When I met someone for the first time, I was always afraid that they would notice right away that I wasn't Ukrainian. I tried to act like a Ukrainian to the T so that I wouldn't stick out in any way.' He reported behaviors such as active participation in soccer, other sports and informal play, speaking in the mixed idiom of Ukrainian and Russian that is popular in the region, using speech registers, especially cursing and slang, eschewing talk or consumption of Vietnamese food outside his family home, and paying attention to his dress and personal appearance so that they conformed to local norms.

Another study participant, Timofei, spoke of an analogous experience of bullying and cross-cultural adaptation. Timofei's grandfather arrived in Ukraine as a miner on a worker exchange visa during the late Soviet era, remained in the independent Ukraine where he gained citizenship. In the early 2000s, Timofei's father arrived from Hanoi, followed shortly thereafter by his mother who joined the extended family in the Donetsk region. Timofei remained in Vietnam with relatives temporarily, arriving in Ukraine at the age of 9. For this reason, Timofei did not experience the unexamined phase of bicultural identity that other participants reported. Timofei recalls being the only ethnic minority at his school:

> I arrived in Ukraine, where racism is present. The more so in a small town where everyone stared, mocked, and somehow managed to make jokes all the time at my expense. I closed myself off more and more and became somewhat like an introvert.

Timofei recalls feeling that he had entered another world where everything was different and where he didn't understand basic rules of social engagement or the language, unable even to read Cyrillic letters.

He spoke, moreover, of his gradual acquisition of language and his understanding of cultural norms and social attitudes as the key to eventual acceptance by a group of Ukrainian schoolchildren in his class: 'I slowly came to understand everything: all their sayings, turns of phrases, witticisms, jokes, and problems, and that's why they no longer felt that I was different. Racist jokes about Asians are fine, children drink alcohol, and so on.' Timofei found his acceptance relied not so much on the performance of physical behaviors as on his ability to display complete understanding and allegiance to what he called 'Ukrainian mentality' – the shared set of social attitudes and world views, many embedded in linguistic practices. The concept of Ukrainian and Vietnamese mentality was often cited by study participants as a key feature of ethnic identity. Interestingly, Timofei felt his gradual acquisition, mastery, and performance of Ukrainian mentality eventually tipped the balance to the point where he was no longer even considered Asian or Vietnamese but ascribed an entirely Ukrainian identity, though he himself spoke of his preference for a bicultural or 'mixed' Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity: 'The fact that I am different from them is what makes me interesting, but despite this they perceive me as one of their own, as Ukrainian, not as Vietnamese.'

Several of our subjects discussed mentality as a key marker of ethnic identity and a complicated contributing factor to their bicultural ethnic identity and dual sense of national belonging. Vanya, for instance, declared: 'I am a Vietnamese person with a Ukrainian mentality.' By this, Vanya meant that his unified personhood was composed of two constituent parts: a Vietnamese body/genetics/heritage and a Ukrainian mind/psychology/social self. Soviet ethnology included psychic disposition, an obsolete term later replaced by national character or mentality in the list of essentialist attributes of all ethnic groups (*etnosy*) – in addition to culture, traditions, heritage, biology, and genetics.[20] For our study participants, language and psychology were bundled into an identity package which had become an inseparable, intrinsic part of who they are. Just as extrinsic racial and ethnic markers could not be erased from their identity, nor could the psychological imprint of Ukrainian subjectivity. As Kostya put it: 'I am who I am. You can't change my skin, you can't change my face, and you can't change my mentality either.' Study participants expressed a binary view of Ukrainian and Vietnamese

mentalities: individual assertiveness/subordination to family values, freedom/self-control, downplaying social pressures/observing social norms, wasteful spending/thrift. Study participants often said that they found the Vietnamese mentality to be old fashioned and not compatible with the way that they see themselves as Vietnamese Ukrainians.

When they later migrated to Vietnam, study participants realized that even though most of them communicate in Vietnamese, social protocols and ways of thinking were quite different, and this led them to the impression that while they may be more Vietnamese in their appearance, they were more Ukrainian in their thinking, given that thinking also often involves language and that they report thinking, speaking and dreaming primarily in Russian and Ukrainian, not Vietnamese. For this reason, study subjects most often spoke of Ukrainian mentality while a few, like Kostya, invoked Russo-Ukrainian mentality to more precisely denote the perceived role of bilingualism in their stream of consciousness: 'I usually think in Ukrainian or Russian, and I can say for a fact that my mentality is more Russo-Ukrainian [than Vietnamese].'

The ethnographic interviews convey the childhood identity shocks and subsequent adaptations that led study participants to gain acceptance as Ukrainian at school. Acceptance as Ukrainian functioned for them as a marker both of ethnic identity and social acceptance. These accounts figure as key moments in their ethnic identity journey narratives, particularly for the second-generation Vietnamese Ukrainians who objected to a monocultural non-Ukrainian identity being ascribed to them against their will. Study participants reported passing through the initial shock phase and entering the adaptation phase of intercultural development and spoke engagingly of their intercultural strategies for relating to others to gain acceptance of their Ukrainian mentality and identity. They also reported developing an intercultural lens through which to perceive themselves more clearly as Vietnamese Ukrainians.

The Russo-Ukrainian war and identity trauma

Each study participant told a unique story of their journey from Ukraine to Vietnam in 2022. On 24 February 2022, the first day of the Special Military Operation, Russian airstrikes hit the city of Odessa, where Maksim heard the loud explosions and witnessed the chaos on the streets from his university dorm room. His family home was several hundred kilometers away in eastern Ukraine. He recalls being shocked into indecision and paralysis, while most other students had deserted the dorm and left Odessa within the next 12 hours. His sister called from Vietnam early the next morning, imploring him to leave Ukraine before the borders were closed. He spent the exorbitant sum of US$300 on the 70 km taxi ride to the Moldovan border and was dropped off at the end of an 8 km-long traffic jam that led to the border crossing. He ran for several kilometers towards the border crossing, where he saw a long queue of people waiting and joined the queue. During the nine hours he waited in the cold, he continuously worried that he was at the time a 17-year-old without an international travel passport. He crossed the border successfully with his domestic Ukrainian ID and took a free bus for war refugees to Chişinău. He joined other Ukrainians who helped him negotiate a series of rides that finally took him to a refugee shelter in Germany, where he waited five months for the local Ukrainian consulate to issue an international passport. He then immediately left for

Vietnam to live with his sister and relatives and pursue his Ukrainian university studies remotely at a host university that provided a student visa and accommodation.

Vietnam, which pursues a policy of neutrality vis-à-vis the Russo-Ukrainian War, invited Russian President Vladimir Putin for a state visit in June 2024 but maintains cordial relations with the Ukrainian government. Vietnam is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Geneva Convention), and receives only a small number of refugees annually, but has aided Vietnamese nationals in evacuating from Ukraine after the outbreak of the Russian Special Military Operation in 2022. Vietnamese nationals living abroad have the right to dual citizenship, and in certain circumstances the children and grandchildren of current and former Vietnamese citizens may receive Vietnamese passports or apply for visa exemptions while in Vietnam. Depending on their legal and family situations, the participants of our study could arrive in Vietnam as Vietnamese nationals/ passport holders, overseas children of Vietnamese nationals, or on student visas. Most Ukrainian universities, since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, provided remote learning to students, whether internally displaced, in European refugee shelters, or at partner universities abroad, to allow degree completion. Ukraine conscripts eligible men between the ages of 25–60 for military service, but university students are exempt from the draft. Ukraine closed its exit borders to most Ukrainian males aged 18–60 soon after the outbreak of war in late February 2022, though foreign passport holders are still permitted to exit, and Ukrainian male students enrolled at foreign universities were banned from leaving Ukraine as of September 2022.

In response to the trauma and shock of the Russo-Ukrainian War, participants in the Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity study reported submitting aspects of their ethnic self-identity to re-examination. In some cases, this process led to an auto-ascription of a primary Ukrainian identity, and in others, to an identity disturbance arising from the uncertain liminal state characteristic of their status as foreign students abroad and refugees of war. In either case, study participants described the temporary moratorium of their Vietnamese-Ukrainian bicultural identity search, cross-cultural adaptation, and growth. The emotional context of war and displacement must be acknowledged before fully appreciating this next stage in the ethnic identity journey of the Vietnamese-Ukrainian research cohort.

After Kharkiv had turned into a battle zone sieged by Russian forces in February 2022, Timofei felt a sense of the surreal terror in the city where he was pursuing medical studies: 'There was bombing all around, you could hear shots. After people had deserted the streets, it felt like the zombie apocalypse.' He vividly conveys, further, the trauma, paralysis, uncertainty, and self-erasure that he experienced at the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War:

> . . . when the war began, I didn't know what would happen, and I had no idea what the future would hold. All my plans fell through, my ideas vanished, and I was left only with the silence of the moment [broken by the sounds of explosions] . . . . This is what I call the stillness. [of war]

Other participants in our study related similar sentiments in their ethnographic interviews narrating the harrowing stories of bombings and shelling that precipitated their flight from Ukraine. Each followed a unique migration path from Ukraine to Vietnam: one boarded a plane in Kyiv direct to Hanoi, others took bus, taxi, or train rides to the

border, only to wait for hours and days before being allowed to exit Ukraine. Some of our participants left Ukraine alone, others in the company of their family. Timofei, for example, crossed the border alone into Poland a few days after the violence began in Kharkiv. All but one of our subjects spent time in European refugee shelters, e.g. in Austria, Poland, Germany, and had different types of positive and negative experiences. Unlike their non-Vietnamese Ukrainian counterparts, however, they had the additional option of relocating to Vietnam, where they also had family ties. Their stays in European shelters tended to be short-term and bookended by travel to Vietnam.

Participants, to a person, reported that the stress of war had had dramatic impacts on their ethnic self-understanding. The upswell in patriotism that is common during times of war led some participants to prioritize Ukrainian identity rather than linger on the subtleties of Vietnamese-Ukrainian bicultural identity. As one participant explained: 'I think that every Ukrainian has become ½ more Ukrainian.' The interviewer interjected: '1½ times more!' While others were less comfortable with quantifying its effects, the war had led several study participants to declare that they were first and foremost Ukrainian, rather than equally Vietnamese and Ukrainian. Svetlana, for example, told the interviewer: 'Having arrived here [in Hanoi], I came to understand that I am Ukrainian.' Tatyana expressed a more nuanced sentiment, hierarchizing Ukraine over Vietnam as the place where she felt the deepest sense of belonging: 'It really was the war that made me understand that Ukraine is my home . . . . Vietnam is my second homeland, but I want to live only in Ukraine.'

Other study participants described a different identity outcome brought on by the lingering effects of war trauma. After arrival in Vietnam, participants were profoundly impacted by the uncertainties of their liminal state as student refugees of war. Responding to this precarious situation, one participant conveyed her feelings of ethnic and national exclusion as follows: 'Although I was born and raised in Ukraine, it never felt like home to me. Now that I am in Vietnam, I cannot say that either.' Uncertainty and the feeling of not belonging anywhere were common responses to the liminal states of student and migration status. Their student status, for example, was blended and contingent, as if they were simultaneously study-abroad students in Vietnam and full-time remote students at Ukrainian universities. Many participants were required to enroll in additional courses at a Vietnamese university, lived in the student dormitories, but were free to continue their Ukrainian undergraduate education entirely online. They were treated unofficially as war refugees fleeing Ukraine temporarily and simultaneously as return migrants settling in Vietnam, possibly longer term. Study participants enjoyed different legal statuses based on the passport(s) they hold, and while most members of the cohort initially expressed hope of a speedy return to Ukraine, months dragged on, plans changed. Their uncertain status along with sudden life-altering changes created an atmosphere contributing to prolonged identity stress.

Study participants described the different ways that war and displacement trauma precipitated a temporary moratorium of their Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity search. This ethnographic study of Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity served the important function of supporting the community of loss as they processed their shared sense of marginalization and victimization. The identity uncertainties characterizing the liminal states of their migration and student status, moreover, presented a highly dynamic terrain in which study participants re-encountered Vietnamese identity in Vietnam and subsequently developed cross-cultural adaptations strategies to navigate their new environment.

The search for Vietnamese identity: stress and adaptation in Vietnam

Study participants had assumed that there would be little need to negotiate their social location and ethnic identity when they first arrived as university students in Vietnam. In fact, many had traveled repeatedly on short-term childhood visits to relatives in Vietnam. During the months after their arrival in 2022, however, study participants reported experiences of culture shock and difficult acculturation, symptoms of a stress phase that would figure centrally in their ethnic identity journey narratives. The descriptive interviews of the research cohort do not reflect the familiar patterns of stress and cross-cultural adaptations of second-generation Vietnamese return migrants who typically come to Vietnam in pursuit of career opportunities.[21] Rather, as short-term university students completing their Ukrainian undergraduate degrees remotely, the Vietnamese-Ukrainian research cohort approached their initial experiences in Vietnam as if they were maladapted study-abroad students. One researcher has shown that although study abroad programs are increasingly shorter in timeframe, university students approach them with greater expectations for rapid personal development.[22] This expectation gap has become a source of student stress leading global educators to create remediation programs focused on cross-cultural adaptation. Reflecting this broader trend, the students in our research cohort experienced an expectation gap upon their arrival to Vietnam. In their interviews they described how the unrealized expectations of social acceptance and rapid acculturation became the source of ethnic identity stress.

Reports of the culture shock by study participants sound similar to the first impressions one might hear from unprepared Western college students on a study abroad program in Vietnam: mild outrage at the perceived pedestrian dangers, unhygienic practices at restaurants, rubbish on the streets, consumption of dog meat, foul-smelling markets, child-sized furniture at sidewalk cafes, high levels of air pollution, intense humidity, and the wearing of designer silk pajamas as outdoor attire. Their stay in Vietnam also prompted comparative thinking expressed in simple binaries that occasionally led to cross-cultural insights:

> Ukrainians are definitely more expressive, while Vietnamese tend to be calmer and less straightforward. These countries have completely different geographic locations, climates, and population densities. Naturally, there will be significant differences. People often discuss differences within [Vietnam, i.e., the North versus the South], so comparing Ukraine and Vietnam may take weeks.

Study participants grappled with the idea that Vietnamese identity encompassed a complex cultural and social system to which they had not been fully exposed nor had fully mastered as young Vietnamese Ukrainians living in Ukraine. Participants quickly learned that minor social behaviors and visual cues set them apart from the majoritarian Vietnamese culture, inviting a steady stream of comments or looks of disapproval. They took for granted that their spoken Vietnamese would present an obstacle to full inclusion in Vietnamese society, and most worked to expand their vocabulary and adopt a more standardized pronunciation.

Sonya, for example, recalls being reprimanded for not using the polite marker *ạ* at the end of her verbal request to a university staff member. Thereafter, she modulated her speech accordingly. While she accepted criticism of her Vietnamese language usage, Sonya was less accepting of criticism of her fashion sense. Sonya's personal appearance,

clothing, make-up, accessories, and hairstyle were commented on by Vietnamese people as being different, and to some degree inappropriate. She interprets Vietnamese personal style as being more conservative, and somewhat conformist, with less freedom for individual flair and idiosyncratic fashion choices. Both male and female study participants alike reported that others immediately noticed that their clothing style differed from that of the majority Vietnamese youth culture. Sonya recalled feeling judgmental stares every time she appeared in public: 'They say to me that I am a strange young woman.' Personal examples like these led several study participants to conclude that it was their duty to conform to ethnic identity norms while in Vietnam, but Sonya felt her Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity was not fully valued (*nepolnotsenno*) by others. She did not feel encouraged to develop her Vietnamese identity independently nor to take pride in the diversity that her bicultural identity represented.

Other participants reported the need to learn new behaviors to adapt to locally accepted attitudes or to ensure their personal safety in Vietnam. Natasha, for example, related how Vietnamese relatives often reprimanded on these issues: ' . . . when I arrived in Vietnam, many people started saying to me, "Oy, you are in Vietnam now, act more like a Vietnamese person!"' As an example of what was meant by this distinction, she considered herself an outspoken law-abiding person in Ukraine but found herself tacitly conforming with the technically illegal practice, common among local friends, of seating two or more people at the back of ride-sharing motorcycles. And she learned to carefully secure and conceal her cell phone when traveling on a ride-sharing motorcycle, after the driver of a nearby motorcycle nearly grabbed her phone away in an act of attempted robbery while passing on a crowded street in Ho Chi Minh City.

It came as a shock to two other participants that they would be entirely excluded from the normative Vietnamese identity solely based on physical appearance. Feeling a sense of déjà vu from analogous childhood experiences, participants found that their ethnic self-identity had been rejected once again. For example, Petro, a biracial student in our study, reported that his Vietnamese identity felt completely erased upon arrival in Vietnam:

> I wasn't entirely accepted by Ukrainians in childhood, but here [in Vietnam] it was like they didn't even understand that I am half Vietnamese ethnically – they say to me that I am not even similar [to them] in any way. . .. it doesn't matter what my roots are.

Vanya, born in Kyiv to two Vietnamese parents, also noticed the rejection of his Vietnamese identity in Hanoi. His physical appearance was scrutinized and not accepted as fully Vietnamese:

> I'm often asked where I'm from and where I grew up. I have a physical appearance that is a bit out of the ordinary and so people think that I am mixed race or Filipino. When I say that I am 100% Vietnamese, they remain skeptical and don't especially believe me.

Vanya and Petro learned that racialized perceptions of their physical appearance had worked against their own sense of ethnic identity and belonging in both Ukraine *and* Vietnam. While the other study participants did not report racial misapprehension in Vietnam, many grew skeptical of the inclusivity of Vietnamese identity within Vietnam, feeling diminished by the ascription of the second-tier identity of foreigner or *Việt Kiều* (Overseas Vietnamese) based on their spoken language ability, social behaviors, attitudes,

or clothing style. They found these terms impediments to their sense of belonging in Vietnam, and they were largely surprised by the obstacles to their acculturation in Vietnamese society.

As speakers of Vietnamese and the children of Vietnamese parents, study participants had assumed that they already possessed full understanding of the Vietnamese mentality, including the array of social behaviors and attitudes that would lead to ready acceptance of their Vietnamese identity in Vietnam. Their prior experience with Ukrainian identity had led them to believe that they would quickly be accepted into an inclusive ethnic and civic Vietnamese identity without significant roadblocks or major efforts at adaptation. Study participants came to understand the pathways to acceptance for a Vietnamese-identified person in Vietnam as more narrowly and rigidly enforced than they had expected. Kostya reached the dispirited conclusion that only those born or raised in Vietnam could ever truly attain a sense of belonging there. Tatyana drew an unfavorable comparison of the social experience of her ethnic identity journey in Vietnam and Ukraine: 'I think that other Vietnamese are much less likely to accept me as being Vietnamese than Ukrainians are to accept me as being Ukrainian.' As bicultural individuals, study participants faced challenges conforming to the majoritarian expectations of how they should behave, speak, and dress upon arrival in Vietnam, and they reported not feeling at home nor accepted as authentically Vietnamese.

Qualitative research on second-generation *Việt Kiều* returnees to Vietnam offers a more hopeful picture of successful acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation. This research has demonstrated the multiple pathways leading to a positive sense of home and belonging experienced by *Việt Kiều* returnees.[23] Of course, the differences between the Vietnamese-Ukrainian study participants and the *Việt Kiều* returnees of Koh's study are manifold. Only after completing higher education did the second-generation *Việt Kiều* participants of Koh's study return to Vietnam from the US, Australia, and Europe, and they cite personal restlessness from career stagnation, an unresolved ethnic identity search, and unsatisfying feelings of belonging in their home country as primary reasons for their return. Second-generation *Việt Kiều*, moreover, report that their sense of belonging in Vietnam results primarily from feelings of personal security, career satisfaction, and vibrant family and social connections. Koh's interviewees proudly accept the *Việt Kiều* identity label and cite the strong confraternity with an extended *Việt K*iều community as a contributing factor to their acculturation and positive sense of belonging in Vietnam.

Rather than compare Vietnamese Ukrainians in our study to older *Việt Kiều* returnees, it is more illuminating to think of these moments in their interviews as a reflection of their status as student sojourners.[24] As is the case with many study-abroad students globally, they experienced an expectation gap, and during the short-term study period in which they had hoped for acceptance and rapid acculturation in Vietnam, they endured a stress phase in their ethnic identity journey. This ethnographic study of Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity doubled as a study abroad adaptation program in which students found a supportive community committed to developing effective approaches to cross-cultural communication. Students aired grievances, shared experiences, negotiated expectation gaps, and developed cross-cultural adaptation strategies. This atmosphere contributed to their ethnic identity achievement and the growth of a more nuanced and self-assured Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity.

Vietnamese-Ukrainian intercultural personhood and future growth

While the Russo-Ukrainian War has been understood as one of many recent contributing factors reinforcing anti-globalization sentiment, Vietnam has emerged as a vibrant epicenter of enduring globalization, called 'the most globalized populous country in modern history'[25] and 'the next Asian economic miracle.'[26] In this larger context, study participants formed a close-knit return diaspora community of highly educated, aspirational, upwardly mobile Vietnamese Ukrainians. They projected confidence about the multiple possibilities that lay before them as Vietnamese Ukrainians: some considered building careers in Vietnam, others expressed the desire to pursue graduate studies or onward migration to third countries. Study participants narrated this phase in their ethnic identity journey as a stage of identity achievement. While engaging in cross-cultural communication and adaptation in Vietnam, they articulated their understanding of a globalized Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity embracing a transnational self, best prepared for future personal growth and career success.

Study participants took an active approach to intercultural personhood that contributed to their Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity achievement. The identity formation process they described conforms to Young Yun Kim's model of intercultural personhood: 'It is a way of existence that transcends the perimeters of a particular culture and is capable of embracing and incorporating seemingly divergent cultural elements into one's own unique worldview.'[27] Tatyana, for example, spoke of her identity formation as a process of carefully selecting the most appealing elements from both the Vietnamese and Ukrainian cultural systems and integrating them into a unified sense of self:

> At first it seemed difficult because of the two different mentalities. And as you grow up, you are supposed to choose one of them . . . . But later I understood that [bicultural identity] had become a privilege, because I was located between two cultures and could pick from each, those things which I liked or better suited me.

Generally, our study participants found that a bicultural identity created through the active integration of two cultures held distinct advantages over monocultural identity. One participant touted diverse modes of thinking as a competitive edge that Vietnamese Ukrainians bring to the table when working or otherwise interacting with monocultural Vietnamese:

> I think that I am more special than ordinary Vietnamese. I think that all Vietnamese born in Ukraine who have returned to Vietnam are more special. We have a different mentality, a different way of thinking. And this makes us special.

This idea echoes with Kim's notion of intercultural personhood as a '*special* kind of *mindset* that promises *fitness* [italics ours] in our increasing intercultural world.'[28]

Study participant Vanya spoke of intercultural personhood as an intentional process of constructing a Vietnamese-Ukrainian hybrid identity. Postcolonial Vietnam's special relationship with the USSR – and later with the Soviet successor states including Ukraine – has provided the space for encounter, multicultural miscegenation, and the rise of so-called hybrid identities, like those discussed in post-colonial theory and represented here by the Vietnamese Ukrainians in our study. Vanya, however, thinks of hybrid identity in Nietzschean terms that resonate broadly with Kim's definition of intercultural personhood as a self-willed process of life

transformation: 'There are no ideal nations. It is necessary to create the hybrid of the future Overman . . . . Because I am a rational person, I need to create a hybrid identity . . . . I consider myself to be Vietnamese-Ukrainian.' Vanya plans to further develop his ethnic identity while in Vietnam by learning more about Vietnamese language and culture, establishing deeper ties with his relatives and exploring the history of his ancestral village. As the eldest son, he feels a deep sense of obligation to both his nuclear family and ancestral clan, and his current focus on Vietnamese aspects of his hybrid identity is intended, before onward migration to Canada, as preparation for future personal and family responsibilities. He plans to take advantage of overseas employment opportunities, pursue graduate studies, marry, and raise children appreciative of their Vietnamese heritage.

In addition to cultural heritage enrichment, study participants approached their stay in Vietnam as a golden opportunity to develop career prospects. Business major Maria, for example, likens intercultural personhood to a process of career identity development facilitating her goal of becoming a highly employable global citizen:

> Vietnam seems to have a lot more opportunities than Ukraine, so I thought it could be a great start to my career . . . . I do not like associating nationality with identity. Being Vietnamese or Ukrainian does not define my character or beliefs . . . . I just consider myself a global citizen.

Maria's approach to intercultural personhood denationalizes and deterritorializes Vietnamese and Ukrainian parochial identities, actively replacing them with a globalized identity more conducive to establishing a career in a multinational workplace. Her embrace of a globalized identity is accompanied by a profound sense of self-acceptance and an expectation of acceptance by others: 'I am just me. I just want to be honest with people around me and more importantly, with myself . . . . I believe that the right people – Ukrainians, Vietnamese, or many other nationalities – will accept me for who I am.' In the quotes above, Maria demonstrates the 'two interrelated processes of individuation and universalization in identity orientation' that are hallmarks of intercultural personhood development.[29] She also depicts an increasingly intercultural way of relating to herself and others. As a business major, Maria approaches intercultural personhood as the assertion of her individuality, authenticity, and a global personal brand supported by an enlightened social/professional network. In this way, she envisions a globalized and transnational Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity as the launchpad for future career success.

As members of an inadvertent return diaspora of overseas Vietnamese, study participants articulated an increasingly intercultural awareness of their Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity. For one, they expressed ethnic identity achievement by acknowledging Vietnamese-Ukrainian bicultural identity as the source of personal and professional advantage. In their accounts, Vietnamese Ukrainian is both a self-empowering, post-colonial hybrid identity and an aspiring transnational identity of highly mobile global citizens. In either case, they acknowledge that Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity has provided them with intercultural tools of adaptation and achievement ensuring their fitness and success in a globalized world where Vietnam and Vietnamese global communities play an increasingly important role.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study of Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity provides the first in-depth examination of an emergent bicultural ethnic identity group and sheds light on the diverse landscape of the global Vietnamese diaspora. The study broadens scholarly conversations of global Vietnamese identities by raising the distinctive case of 10 Vietnamese-Ukrainian students: their family migration histories to the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Ukraine, their early adaptation to the Ukrainian identity, their experiences as student refugees of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, their identity adaptation to present-day Vietnam as student sojourners and *Việt Kiều* (Overseas Vietnamese) return migrants, and their achievement of a globalized, intercultural Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity.

The group shared an implicit narrative structure in their life stories of ethnic identity self-awareness and embraced an understanding of Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity as an evolving process or ethnic identity journey. This concept reflects the journeys that shape identity framework in the anthropological scholarly literature. Study participants, moreover, recounted distinct developmental stages in their ethnic identity journey. At key moments in their ethnographic interviews, for example in their accounts of childhood in Ukraine or their recent arrival in Vietnam, they narrated ethnic identity self-awareness as a process that unfolds in distinct stages. These accounts affirm the tripartite structure of Phinney's ethnic identity developmental model – unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search, ethnic identity achievement – and Kim's model of intercultural personhood: stress, adaptation, growth.

The stress of war trauma and displacement created an overwhelming identity shock, which in the short term resulted in an upsurge of Ukrainian patriotic identity sentiments or at times, a sense of identity loss. In the longer term, however, identity stress experienced during transnational migration catalyzed participant identity achievement and intercultural personhood. Study participants displayed cross-cultural communication strategies and intercultural self-understanding in their ethnographic interviews. In addition, the research cohort comprised a community of belonging committed to sharing the identity adaptation strategies they had developed during various stages of their lives. Most concluded their interviews with a self-aware approach to Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity as a self-ascribed intercultural identity. They attributed personal and social advantages to Vietnamese-Ukrainian identity in their pursuit of exemplary lives within the multicultural global environment in which Vietnam is expected to play an increasingly prominent role.

Notes

1. Huwelmeier, "Transnational Vietnamese: Germany and beyond".
2. Schwenkel, "Vietnamese in Central Europe. An unintended diaspora".
3. Hoang, *Vietnamese Migrants in Russia: Mobility in Times of Uncertainty*, and "Migrant immobilities in the periphery: Insights from the Vietnam-Russia corridor".

4. Cited in Mazulem, "'This country gave me a lot': The Vietnamese people staying in Ukraine".
5. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*.
6. Shnirelman, "Race, ethnicity, and cultural racism in Soviet and post-Soviet ideology, communication, and practice," 1.
7. Kulyk, "Identity in transformation: Russian-Speakers in post-Soviet Ukraine".
8. Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe, A History of Ukraine*, 21.
9. Lee, "Deterritorialized nationality: Viktor Tsoi saves the world," 160.
10. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War, The Return of History*, 211–2.
11. Tran & Bifuh-Ambe, "Ethnic identity among second-generation Vietnamese American adolescents".
12. Barber, "Belonging in the UK Vietnamese community: Second-generation experiences".
13. Nguyen, "Vietnamese women in the Australian Defence Force: Minorities, histories and cultural heritage".
14. Koh, "Return of the Lost Generation? Search for belonging, identity and home among second generation Việt Kiều: The question of return".
15. Schatz-Oppenheimer and Kalinsky, "Traveling far – drawing closer: Journeys that shape identity," 170.
16. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War, The Return of History*, 172.
17. Phinney, "Multigroup ethnic identity measure, A new scale for use with diverse groups" and Kim, "Intercultural personhood: Globalization and a way of being," respectively.
18. Phinney, ibid.
19. Zdravomyslova, "Working mothers and nannies: Commercialization of childcare and modifications in the gender contract".
20. Shnirelman, ibid., 4–5.
21. Koh, ibid.
22. Pitts, "Identity and the role of expectations, stress, and talk in short-term student sojourner adjustment".
23. Koh, "You can come home again: Narratives of home and belonging among second-generation Việt Kiều in Vietnam".
24. Pitts, ibid.
25. Kopf, "Vietnam is the most globalized populous country in modern history".
26. Sharma, "Is Vietnam the next 'Asian miracle'?".
27. Kim, "Intercultural personhood: An integration of Eastern and Western perspectives," 413.
28. Ibid.
29. Kim, "Finding a 'Home' beyond culture: The emergence of intercultural personhood in the globalizing world," 3.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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