

Forever foreign

What does it feel like to be a citizen of a global world? **Khue Pham** offers her experience.

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Nobody can imagine the horror I felt when I learnt of this summer's family travel plans: Vietnam. While most people consider this a great holiday destination, and my parents love it because it is their home country, for me Vietnam constitutes first and foremost a geo-cultural nightmare. I cringed at the thought of going there but due to my sense of family responsibility, I reluctantly booked my flight from London Heathrow to Ho Chi Minh City Tan Son Nhat.

My parents left Vietnam for Germany over 30 years ago and raised me and my siblings there. Three years ago, I left Berlin to study in London and am therefore somewhat of a double-foreigner with Vietnamese blood and a German passport. My Vietnamese heritage manifests itself most strongly in my appearance (people like to guess where I'm from and they like to guess it wrong), the oh-so-nice food we eat at home, and our excessive family life. Now I live in London but we still go on family holidays and will probably continue to do so until I have my own family. To other people it may seem strange but to me it's just the natural family order of life.

I was raised with a strong sense of being non-German, because my parents used to say 'you're not German, you're different' when they wouldn't

allow me to go out with my German friends, which happened very frequently. Late parties, sleepovers, and short trips were all things I 'didn't need to copy.' I would feel desperate not only because I couldn't go but also because I couldn't explain why not to the friends I was so often forced to disappoint. After all, how would they ever understand that my parents were raising me within a completely different cultural system, so alien to theirs that I felt it couldn't be understood adequately from the Western perspective? At those times, I cursed my bi-cultural fate of difference and had a strong longing to just be like everybody else. Being like the Germans seemed extremely desirable to me when I was younger.

But being different from German people never equalled having a lot in common with Vietnamese people. My experience of the country restricts itself to a visit every couple of years, and my Vietnamese language skills carry me through a simple conversation but no further. Having grown up in the liberal West, I have always disliked certain aspects of Vietnamese culture, such as the submissive role of women and the shameless celebration of male supremacy.

Hospitable

On the other hand, I like the Vietnamese emphasis on family and solidarity, which I prefer to the self-centred side of Western individualism. Vietnamese people are very inclusive, hospitable and helpful: they like to get friendly with whomever they meet, friends and strangers alike.

Going to Vietnam would mean confronting the contradictions within my own identity and having to throw myself into the South East Asian jungle of cultural expectations and behavioural conventions. It would also mean seeing my relatives again and being around people who look like me, eat the same food as I do, and find it normal to hang out with their family. I had ambivalent feelings and found the prospect of my summer holiday rather disconcerting.

After our arrival in Ho Chi Minh City, it took me a few days to get used to the heat, feel at ease with constantly having relatives around, and remember how to cross a street (take London traffic, replace all cars with mopeds and add the golden traffic rule of never-ever-stop). I also got used to not being able to speak much, being treated like a child of the family rather than an individual, and not having any private sphere at all. The Vietnamese foible for food compares to the

British love of booze – excessive, that is. Food is omnipresent, always and cheaply available. At such times I felt the same as everybody else because sharing the social ritual equalised us.

Different

But of course, we, the Vietkieu (Vietnamese living abroad), were not the same. To our relatives, we seemed so tall (I'm 1.65m), so rich, so Western. Our accents and our clothes acted as signifiers of our foreignness and often people would stare at us when passing by. Market sellers would quote us quadrupled prices. We weren't as skilled in bargaining or riding mopeds in the mad traffic as the Vietnamese and we had different ideas about life. On the last evening of our visit, my uncle asked my sister whether she would consider marrying a Vietnamese. 'No', she replied, 'I think I'm too different'. Ignoring her answer, he said that he could recommend someone suitable, and his wife added: 'You should think about it. Nowadays, there are some very tall Vietnamese men.'

Being in Vietnam wasn't always easy, but leaving Vietnam was hard as well. As the day of our departure came, I felt sad and relieved at the same time. As much as I regretted leaving my relatives and the country, I was also happy to go back to London and have more personal freedom again. Still, coming back was strange and I felt a bit lonely and very cold. I was back dealing with a familiar difference – the German distance from the British norm, my culturally alienating distaste for alcohol, the dislocated identity in a patriotic nation. At the same time, I find London to be a great home because this is the place where people from all kinds of backgrounds come, mingle and leave again. It is the base of the rootless, the space of the hybrid where it's not unusual that being so different is normal. ■

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wrote her dissertation on the Vietnamese second generation in Germany. She set up the website [whispers-online](http://whispers-online.net) last year, and invites a range of contributions, on experiences, on art, on culture. Find out more at www.whispers-online.net or email her at pham.khue@gmail.com