

Lan Anh Hoang, *Vietnamese Migrants in Russia: Mobility in Times of Uncertainty*

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Migration in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has proven to be more diverse and dynamic than in periods prior. The increased ease of travel, people's greater access to information, and economic aspirations to improve one's lot in life have led people to move to more distant and surprising places in pursuit of some larger objective—be it an economic one, a political one, or a cosmopolitan one. Lan Anh Hoang's *Vietnamese Migrants in Russia: Mobility in Times of Uncertainty* offers a glimpse into one such community that many would find to be a surprising product of the intersection of historic, political, and economic forces: Vietnamese migration to Russia.

The book is comprised of six chapters (introduction included), a conclusion, a methodological appendix, references, and an index. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in Russia from 2013 to 2016, *Vietnamese Migrants in Russia* focuses on the lives of Vietnamese who migrate to Russia in search of economic opportunity. The book presents data from Vietnamese working in several field sites, though Hoang cites Moscow's Sadovod Market as the book's main field site (15). Hoang does an excellent job providing a "thick description" of an array of Vietnamese migrants in Russia, lucidly and interestingly depicting their tribulations, frustrations, and ways they interact with the Russian state and Russian society. These lengthy and detailed vignettes give voice to Vietnamese interlocutors in their own words.

Conceptually, the book centers around the theme of "uncertainty" that Vietnamese experience throughout their sojourns in Russia. For Vietnamese, the migration process is marked with considerable uncertainty regarding whether they will actually prosper economically, whether they will be deported or extorted, and whether they will experience physical violence at the hands of locals or other migrant populations, as well as in various other areas of their lives. Synthesizing the main conceptual argument, Hoang posits that "the particular life circumstances and social relationships that uncertainty produces transforms people's sense of place, space, and identity in the most profound manner" (36). Most Vietnamese only view Russia as a transit point in their migration journey, envisioning the country as more of a temporary stopover location before ultimately settling elsewhere (51, 211). Because Vietnamese find it difficult to integrate into Russian society, and because they encounter many problems culturally and administratively, migrants' experiences in Russia are riddled with uncertainty toward both the present and future.

The book offers a wide range of insights into the lives of Vietnamese in Russia. It provides a historical overview of the political, economic, and social factors that have led to the migration of Vietnamese to Russia, as well as why Russia has become a tangible migration destination (24, chapter 2). Chapter 1, which also serves as the introduction, explains that there are two discrete patterns of migration to Russia: those of “low-waged contract workers” and “irregular, spontaneous migration” (30). However, “while they sound different in terms of pathways, work regimes, and state governance (or lack thereof), both migration flows are controlled by complex and highly exploitative transnational brokerage networks” (31). Additionally, the book offers a detailed look at Russia’s immigration policies (55–66), how trust with coethnics (or lack thereof) affects the lives of Vietnamese migrants in important ways (chapter 4), how Vietnamese gender and relationship norms from Vietnam are transgressed in the Russian context (chapter 5), and how Vietnamese are victimized and exploited in multiple ways throughout the migration process, among others. Especially interesting to me was the discussion of Vietnamese informal money exchange networks and how migration brokers and “go-betweens” operate within the confines of Russia’s “shadow economy” (chapter 3, particularly 93–120).

Another intriguing phenomenon the book covers is interethnic relations within Russia’s migrant populations. Hoang compares Vietnamese to their “rival” Chinese migrants throughout the book, showing how, for instance, Chinese tend to stick together and establish much greater degrees of ethnic solidarity compared to Vietnamese. This solidarity resonates differentially culturally, socially, and economically for the two groups. Such comparisons highlight what factors contribute to the different outcomes on the ground in Russia despite possessing similar motivations (19–22, 51–56, 70, 144–47). The book also describes how Vietnamese are seen by migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus as weak and therefore easy targets of crime, describing them as “low neck, small voice” (131). Such portrayals offer glimpses into the myriad outcomes and realities of the migrant experience in Russia.

While the book is well written and offers interesting insights into many aspects of Vietnamese migration to Russia, two areas of the book were somewhat disappointing: conceptually and the lack of Russian voices. The book set out to explore the theme of “uncertainty” and how it impacts the lives of Vietnamese migrants in Russia. However, “uncertainty” could have been more clearly and fully unpacked. What I found to be the most intriguing and potentially transformative theoretical/conceptual claim—that the uncertainty Vietnamese experience led to profound transformations in terms of “place, space, and identity”—was left wanting. Regarding the lack of Russian voices, the book levels many claims against Russians and Russian society—racist, xenophobic, “migrantphobic” (chapter 2)—yet does not seriously incorporate Russian voices on these matters. This is not to say that Russians do not harbor such sentiments (my personal conversations with foreigners in Russia and with Central Asians in many ways support Hoang’s claims), but to make claims such as Russian’s “migrantphobia is, to a large extent, about Russians’ sense of uncertainty and vulnerability in their own lives” (75) without seriously incorporating voices or perspectives from ample numbers of Russians is, in my humble opinion, somewhat problematic.

Nevertheless, English-language sources on Vietnamese in Russia remain limited, and Hoang’s book makes an important contribution to this interesting phenomenon. The book would be most beneficial to migration studies scholars and those concerned

with Russia and Vietnam in particular. However, the book also does an absolutely excellent job of offering examples of good ethnographic writing, something that many ethnographies today fall short of. Graduate and undergraduate ethnography classes would benefit considerably from the book's ethnographic content. Hoang clearly got to know her interlocutors in deep and meaningful ways, which allowed for such fascinating ethnographic depictions. Hoang is also featured on the University of Melbourne's *Ear to Asia* podcast discussing this research, which is a nice supplement to the book itself.

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