

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR ILLEGAL VIETNAMESE MIGRANT WORKERS IN THAILAND

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Abstract: *Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand along with those from other neighboring countries increasingly play an important role in the local economy. They are also an important source of income for the sending country. However, the illegal status of Vietnamese workers in Thailand presents a number of challenges both individually and communally. This paper explores the difficulties faced by Vietnamese who come to this country to make a living. These difficulties arise not only from having to work illegally, but also from social, cultural, and linguistic barriers that they must confront in the Thai environment. It proposes that these difficulties are partially made easier by the availability of social media, in particular Facebook. The prevalent use of Facebook among Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand helps to build community by connecting family, friends, and faith groups together, by serving as a resource for important news and information pertaining to legal and social issues that directly affect them, and by serving as a means for community support in time of crisis. This paper argues that social media, as seen in the case of Vietnamese migrant workers, can effectively be used by community and religious leaders to provide various types of support for migrant workers living in diaspora.*

Keywords: *Vietnamese migrant workers, social media, Vietnamese in diaspora*

Introduction

On August 17, 2015, Bangkok, Thailand's capital city, was rocked by a bomb exploding in the vicinity of Erawan Shrine, one of the most visited Hindu shrines in the city, located in a busy shopping and tourist district. The incident took place in the early evening when many people were on their way home from work and others were beginning to go about for the evening. The detonated bomb took 20 lives and caused injury to more than 100 people of both Thai and foreign nationalities.¹ The terrorist attack caused an already unstable Thailand with its much political strife to fall even more in disarray as the government and the national police tried to make sense of the situation and to carry out investigations as to the people and the motive behind the most serious bombing incident that the city had ever experienced. The investigations would eventually lead to the arrest of two foreigners, ostensibly with Chinese and Turkish passports,² one of whom the Thai police asserted was the

¹ BBC News, "Bangkok bomb: Victims and Survivors," accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33970145>

² BBC News, "Bangkok Erawan Shrine Bomb: Suspects Appear in Re-enactment," accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34369840>.

person caught on the closed circuit video placing the back bag containing the bomb right outside the fence of the shrine,³ while the other as the person who delivered and perhaps detonated the bomb using his mobile phone.⁴ While the economic and political consequences of the incident came as no surprise to anyone, a development in the process of the investigation came unexpectedly when the media reported on September 10 that the one of the two arrested suspects, Adam Karadag, revealed that he had made his way into Thailand illegally by bribing immigration officials at a Thai-Cambodian checkpoint with 600 USD.⁵ The police chief, Somyot Poompanmoung, who used to serve as a deputy commander with immigration police, immediately called on the prime minister and the military government to clamp down on corrupt border officials.⁶ The call led swiftly to the action to halt a long-time tradition in tourist-loving Thailand known as visa-run.⁷ For dozens of years, foreigners who come to Thailand on a tourist visa, or a visa exemption for a period usually of 30 days can prolong their stay in the kingdom by exiting the country through one of its immigration check points, then returning for a fresh period of stay only to make another such trip the following month. Although Thai immigration laws do not forbid such an activity, it only allows for a few times and not in the ongoing basis as is the case with many foreigners in Thailand. Because ongoing visa-runs are illegal, immigrant officials at the various border check points usually take bribes of anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand baht to stamp the passports allowing foreigners to stay in Thailand. Some people who work as English teachers in the country manage to stay for years this way.⁸

The revelation of corruption in the bombing investigation and the subsequent clamp down led to consequences that were completely unexpected, at least for the group of people who is the focus of this paper, illegal Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand. For years, Vietnamese managed to remain and make a living in this country precisely through this method of doing monthly visa runs at the various immigration check points, mostly along the Thai-Cambodian and Thai-Lao border.⁹

³ Bangkok Post, “Police Nab Prime Bomb Suspect,” accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/police-nab-prime-bomb-suspect/677024>.

⁴ Bangkok Post, “Erawan Suspects Re-enact Bombing,” accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/learning-from-news/708500/erawan-suspects-re-enact-bombing>.

⁵ The Straits Time, “Bangkok Blast Suspect Bribed His Way into Thailand: Police,” accessed January 16, 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/bangkok-blast-suspect-bribed-his-way-into-thailand-police>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Thai Visa News, “Thai-Cambo Check Points Closed to Visa Runners with Immediate Effect,” accessed January 16, 2016, <http://news.thaivisa.com/thailand/reports-thai-cambo-border-check-points-closed-to-visa-runners-with-immediate-effect/114100/>

⁸ Bangkok Post, “Visa runs now illegal for tourists, police say,” accessed January 17, 2016, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/work/693976/visa-runs-now-illegal-for-tourists-say-police>.

⁹ The visa runs between Thailand and Cambodia became possible for Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand in the last five years after Cambodia began to let Vietnamese citizens enter the country with visa exemptions. Prior to that the visa runs were only possible for

As a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Vietnamese nationals are allowed to enter Thailand on a visa exemption for a period of 30 days. This is a privilege that Vietnamese are taking advantage of for the purpose of visiting Thailand as tourists. However, it is also a method that many are using in order to enter the country for the purpose of finding long-term employment. Every day tour buses take Vietnamese nationals into Thailand via Thai-Lao immigration check points, from where they make their way into virtually all parts of Thailand in order to work. The majority, however, come to the Bangkok metropolis and surrounding provinces. Unlike migrant workers from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand could not apply for visa and work permits. Even when registration was allowed by the Thai government for a period of 30 days in the last month of 2015, the conditions were so stringent that only a small number of the Vietnamese workers qualified.¹⁰ Thus, for the great number of Vietnamese workers in Thailand, the monthly visa-runs continue to be the primary method of remaining in Thailand legally despite working illegally.

The news of the sudden clamp down put Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand in utter confusion as they struggled to make sense of the situation. Some who followed the news on Thai television had a clearer idea of what was going on. However, others who did not or could not understand the official news channels relied on words of mouth, some of which were accurate, while others were either inaccurate or completely false. Most turned to social media, in particular Facebook, in order to get updates on the situation from friends and community groups. In those days, I was bombarded with telephone calls and inbox messages on my Facebook account asking for clarifications and advice on what to do. The situation was urgent because thousands of Vietnamese took to the border on a daily basis. Those whose passports were about to expire faced imminent danger of becoming not only illegal migrant workers but also staying in Thailand illegally if they did not immediately leave the country. In those days and the weeks following, Facebook became the primary source of news and information for Vietnamese migrant workers as they tried to follow various developments in the Thai government's action regarding visa runs, sort out all the news and rumors about when and where they perhaps can get their passports renewed, and get clues and information about ways and services that could help them keep their documents legal amidst the clamp down. I myself became sort of a news outlet for many of them as they relied on me to help clarify the conflicting information as well as to suggest ways to rectify the situation. Many sent me messages saying that they only waited for my Facebook posts with information before believing anything that they received from other people.

those who made the trip to the Laos. As a result, many who worked in Bangkok and provinces in the central and southern Thailand had to let their passports expire because the distance to Laos was too far.

¹⁰ The conditions for a one-year registration were following: (1) the last legal entry into the Kingdom of Thailand must take place before 10.8.2015; (2) visa for staying in Thailand must have expired; (3) Work to be registered for must be one of four types – restaurant service, construction work, fishery work, and house work; (4) the applicant must have a Thai employer and work contract.

Recounting the above episode for the purpose of this paper is to highlight an example of the role of social media, especially Facebook, in the life of communities living in diaspora, in this case, Vietnamese migrants who are working illegally in Thailand. While there have already been many studies made on the impact of social media on the personal and social life of individuals of various age groups (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Gozales and Hancock, 2011; Farooqi et al., 2013), as well as case studies of Internet use among migrant workers (Peng, 2012; Newell and Gomez, 2015; Frantz, 2014), the situation of illegal Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand is an interesting one and its examination can help us to see how social media plays a role in their lives in unexpected ways. This paper aims to explore the relationship between social media and community building dynamics among illegal Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand. It hypothesizes the following points: (1) social media is one of the primary unifying outlets for Vietnamese living in diaspora, especially in situations of great limitations in term of time, money, and social mobility; (2) social media can become a vital instrument for building community of faith in difficult conditions; and (3) social media can serve as an important tool for community and religious leaders in reaching out to illegal migrant workers. It must be said at the outset that studies made on the Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand are very few, perhaps due to its relatively smaller size compared to those who come from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. This paper, therefore, is one of the few that will contribute to further explorations on the situation of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand. While information retrieved from various sources will certainly be cited where necessary, a great part of this paper is the result of my direct interactions with thousands of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand for nearly a decade. Thus, the nature of this research will be both empirical and analytical as I present the results of my investigations.

The Phenomenon of Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand and Elsewhere

Migration in order to find work is hardly a new phenomenon in human history. People everywhere have done so for hundreds if not thousands of years, whether it is internally, to a neighboring country, or even across continents. According to International Labour Organization, there are presently 175 million international migrant workers around the world comprising of men, women, as well as children.¹¹ Migrant workers contribute not only to the economy of the host country but also to that of their home country. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), in 2014 migrant workers in Europe alone sent a total of 109.4 billion dollars in remittance back to their home countries,

¹¹ International Labour Organization, “International Labour Standards on Migrant Workers,” accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/migrant-workers/lang--en/index.htm>.

benefitting approximately 150 million people around the world.¹² According to The World Bank, however, global remittances for the year reached 583 billion dollars.¹³ It also estimates that in 2016, global remittances will achieve about 610 billion dollars, 459 billion of which will flow to developing countries.¹⁴ Vietnamese overseas workers send back to their home country over 2 billion USD per year, making a relatively sizable contribution to the local economy.¹⁵

Globalization has caused unprecedented levels of migration and will continue to do so in complex ways.¹⁶ Vietnamese are not exceptions to this trend, especially with Vietnam's population presently exceeding 90 million, making it the 13th most populous country in the world. At the same time, over 1.7 million Vietnamese are entering into the workforce annually making the need for creating jobs an urgent matter for the government.¹⁷ A report prepared by the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry indicates that in 2011, there were over 500,000 Vietnamese nationals working in over 40 countries and territories around the world.¹⁸ By 2013, the total number had reached approximately 600,000.¹⁹ Each year there are approximately 80,000 people leaving Vietnam to work in other countries through broker firms.²⁰ This number, however, does not include those who go abroad on student or tourist visas but instead find long term employment overseas. This is often found in the case of Vietnamese going to Australia, Singapore and Korea, and it is almost always the case when it comes to Thailand. Despite the fact that countries such as the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and Korea are high on the list of countries that Vietnamese desire to go in order to obtain a better financial future for themselves and their families, they are not so accessible to the average Vietnamese worker. Thus, the majority have to settle for less difficult receiving countries such as Taiwan, Malaysia, Laos and Thailand in Asia, or Libya and Angola in Africa.

Up until recently, virtually all Vietnamese laborers in Thailand had been working illegally. Each day, numerous buses carry the Vietnamese from their home

¹² Inter Press Service, "Remittances from Europe Top 100 Billion Dollars," accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2015/06/remittances-from-europe-top-100-billion-dollars/>.

¹³ The World Bank, "Remittances growth to slow sharply in 2015, as Europe and Russia stay weak; pick up expected next year," accessed January 20, 2016, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/04/13/remittances-growth-to-slow-sharply-in-2015-as-europe-and-russia-stay-weak-pick-up-expected-next-year>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kinh Tế Sài Gòn Online, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.thesaigontimes.vn/129148/Quy-1-Kieu-hoi-ve-TPHCM-dat-tren-12-ti-do-la-My.html>.

¹⁶ Peter S. Li, "World Migration in the Age of Globalization: Policy Implications and Challenges" *New Zealand Population Reviews* 33/34 (2008): 1-2.

¹⁷ Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Report on the Situation of Vietnamese Overseas Workers" (Báo cáo tổng quan về tình hình di cư của công dân Việt Nam ra nước ngoài), (Hà Nội: Cty ADN, 2011); 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹ Viet Nhan Luc, "Xuat Khau Lao Dong Viet Nam Ra Nuoc Ngoai," accessed January 20, 2016, <http://vietnhanluc.com/xuat-khau-lao-dong-viet-nam-ra-nuoc-ngoai>.

²⁰ Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9.

provinces into Laos or Cambodia, then onward to Thailand. With road conditions much improved compared to the past, these trips in most cases take less than a day to get to Thailand and another 8-10 hours to arrive in Bangkok, although other destinations are possible as well. Although there is no official figure of the number of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, it is believed that the total is up to tens of thousands.²¹ The reasons for why Vietnamese choose to come to Thailand has to do with the situation in their home country as well as qualities present in the receiving country. According the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs report, sending Vietnamese nationals to work overseas is an important and active policy of the Vietnamese government because it has not been able to satisfy the demand for employment internally.²² The majority of Vietnamese laborers are low-skilled and come from the countryside. Creating jobs for all of them is a challenge that is difficult to overcome. At the same time, the Vietnamese economy in recent years has not been so vibrant with the GDP growth rate at 5.2 percent (2012), 5.43% (2013), 6.0% (2014), and 6.5% (2015).²³ Even though the economy is expected to expand by 6.6% for 2016, the Vietnamese income level remains in the low middle bracket. In the second quarter of 2015, the reported unemployment rate in Vietnam slightly rose to 2.44, which still remained quite low. However, according to Nguyen Ba Ngoc at the Institute of Science and Labor, this figure does not accurately reflect the employment situation in Vietnam. Due to its method of collecting data, a person who has worked for merely an hour before being surveyed is still classified as employed.²⁴ In reality, unemployment and underemployment should be much higher than that indicated by official government statistics.

While Vietnamese from throughout the country go overseas to find employment, those who come to Thailand hail from only a limited number of provinces, mostly in the north central and south northern parts of Vietnam, namely the provinces of Quang Binh, Ha Tinh, Nghe An, Thanh Hoa, Phu Tho, and Hoa Binh. Among these, the vast majority come from the two provinces of Ha Tinh and Nghe An. In the south, there is only a small number of Vietnamese who come to Thailand for work.

Having considered some of the factors stemming from the home country, one cannot overlook the main reasons that make Thailand a desired destination for Vietnamese laborers. Thailand has one of the strongest economies in the region with GDP for the two years of 2013 and 2014 reigning in at 387.25 billion USD and 373.8 billion USD, respectively.²⁵ According to the IMF, Thailand ranks second in

²¹ Dantri News, “More Protection for Viet Workers in Thailand,” accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.dtinews.vn/en/news/018/38712/more-protection-for-viet-workers-in-thailand.html>.

²² Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17.

²³ Focus Economics, “Vietnam Economic Outlook,” accessed January 16, 2016, <http://www.focus-economics.com/countries/vietnam>.

²⁴ Thanh Nien News, “Big holes in Vietnam’s 1.9 pct Unemployment Rate,” accessed January 16, 2016, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/big-holes-in-vietnams-19-pct-unemployment-rate-24806.html>.

²⁵ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/thailand/gdp>

the ASEAN in GDP while Vietnam ranks sixth. In term of GDP per capita, Thailand ranks fourth behind Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia. Vietnam, on the other hand, ranks seventh in the region.²⁶ According to some expert estimates Vietnam's GDP per capita is said to lag behind that of Thailand by about 20 years and behind Malaysia by about 25 years.²⁷ Even though the economy of Thailand is more developed than that of Vietnam, Thailand is facing a shortage of labor, especially in the low skilled sector. Due to the increase in personal income as well as education and specialized skills in the Thai population, the number of low skilled laborers has decreased. It is increasingly difficult for employers to find local workers for jobs characterized by low pay, heavy labor, lacking stability, and having unsanitary and dangerous working conditions, etc.²⁸ The situation is exasperated by the reality of Thai society becoming increasingly aged. Compared to its neighbors, Thailand has the lowest rate of youth, having only 15.1 percent of its population being in the age group of 15-24 years old. In Vietnam, this group makes up 18.4 percent, Myanmar (18.6 percent), Cambodia (21.2 percent), and Laos PDR (21.3%).²⁹

Beside the relative economic strength of Thailand compared to Vietnam, there are also other reasons that attract Vietnamese laborers to come to this country. While the process to apply for jobs in countries such as Australia, Korea, and Japan through broker companies is both expensive and time consuming, going to Thailand is a much simpler and less expensive endeavor. Even though salaries in these countries are quite high, not everyone can afford the financial investment needed to get a job in Korea (5,000 USD) or Japan (10,000 USD). Moreover, if receiving countries require workers to have specialized skills as in the case of Japan, then the opportunity for the majority of Vietnamese workers are virtually non-existent. Malaysia is a receiving country that does not restrict itself to skilled workers; however, getting to Malaysia also requires going through broker companies. On the other hand, going to Thailand does not have to be done through middlemen. About 10-15 years ago when the wave of Vietnamese migrant workers going to Thailand was just in its early stages, many people relied on individuals who charged a fee for arranging the trip and accompanying them to Thailand, even finding them job placements. However, in recent years this service has become much less needed because most newcomers simply make the trip with family members or friends who have been in Thailand for a certain length of time and know the way to get where they needed to go. In some instances when the services of the guides are needed, the fee is minimal.

²⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ASEAN_countries_by_GDP_\(nominal\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ASEAN_countries_by_GDP_(nominal))

²⁷ VNExpress, "Thu nhập người Việt đi sau Hàn Quốc Thái Lan hàng chục năm," accessed January 17, 2016, <http://kinhdoanh.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/doanh-nghiep/thu-nhap-nguoi-viet-di-sau-han-quoc-thai-lan-hang-chuc-nam-3271028.html>.

²⁸ Watcharee Srikham, "Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Ubon Ratchathani Municipality," *Journal of Mekong Societies* 10, no.1 (2014): 140.

²⁹ Nancy Nguyen and John Walsh, "Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand – Implications for Leveraging Migration for Development," *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies* 8, no.1 (2014): 72.

Going to Thailand is also an attractive option partially because the trip is relatively easy. Nowadays, there are numerous buses that take the Vietnamese from their home provinces across the border into Laos or Cambodia. From there, they get on another bus that brings them into Thailand, and subsequently to their final destinations in Bangkok and other provinces throughout the country. In recent years, the road conditions have greatly improved both in Vietnam as well as in Laos and Cambodia, making the trip much less time consuming and difficult than in the past.³⁰ A person can very well have breakfast in Vietnam, then lunch in Laos, and finally enjoy dinner in Thailand. The returning trip to Vietnam is also equally easy for Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand. On special occasions such as Tet (Lunar New Year), religious festivals, and family events such as weddings and funerals, they can easily make the trip home to take part in these affairs. When emergencies and family issues arise needing their presence to help solve problems, most can make it back to their homes within 24 hours of traveling by bus. Traveling by air between Thailand and Vietnam has also become quite affordable in recent years with one-way tickets sometimes costing as low as 30 USD between Bangkok and Hanoi.

Beside the proximity and the convenient means of traveling between Vietnam and Thailand, another important factor is the policy of visa exemption for citizens of ASEAN member countries traveling within the region. Vietnamese entering the kingdom of Thailand are able to stay for a maximum of 30 days without having to apply for a visa. Afterward, they must leave the kingdom. However, for the majority of Vietnamese laborers, they deal with the issue by taking a bus to the border, leaving the country (entering Laos or Cambodia), then coming back in with a fresh stamp for a 30 day stay. This routine takes place over and over again for the majority of Vietnamese laborers. For a small number of workers who do not want to deal with the hassle of the monthly visa run, they choose to take the risk of letting their visa expire and become not only people who work illegally in Thailand, but also remain illegally in the country.

The next factor that attracts Vietnamese laborers to Thailand is the relatively high level of income that they can achieve here. Comparing to low-skilled jobs in Vietnam such as peddling fruits and ice cream, working at restaurants and pubs, and sewing, etc. the income in Thailand may be twice or three times greater than what can be made in their homeland. With a stable job, a worker can save about 10,000 – 20,000 baht (280 – 560 USD) each month in order to send back home to help with family finances. This is not a small amount of money for families who come from the rural areas, especially when compared to starting earnings of new university graduates in Vietnam averaging only 2.7 million VND/month (120 USD).³¹

³⁰ Nguyen and Walsh, 76.

³¹ Tuoi Tre News, “Vietnam Pays Domestic Workers Better than College Graduates: Survey,” accessed January 16, 2016, <http://tuoitrenews.vn/society/12733/vietnam-pays-domestic-workers-better-than-college-graduates-survey>.

In summary, the factors that give rise to the phenomenon of Vietnamese laborers coming to Thailand reflect both the situation in the sending as well as the receiving countries. Even though Vietnamese workers are making a living in Thailand illegally, and the Thai-Vietnam labor cooperation plan remains in the early stages of implementation, reality shows that Thailand continues to be an attractive destination for Vietnamese migrant workers both in the present and in the future.

Portrait of the Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand

The majority of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand hail from the northern half of central Vietnam, and a lesser number come from northern and southern provinces of the country. With a few exceptions, the majority of them come from rural farming families with limited education. Only a small number have completed secondary education and it is rare to find someone who has finished tertiary education. The college and university graduates who do come to Thailand to work as laborers do so because they can make more money through manual jobs in Thailand than they can in Vietnam in their field of studies. The vast majority of Vietnamese migrant workers fall in the age group of 16 to 35 years old, both male and female, single as well as married. Upon coming to the country, they find employment in such jobs as serving in restaurants and bars, working in the garment industry, and peddling fruits, vegetables, and ice cream, etc. A small number manage to open their own garment factories employing fellow Vietnamese migrant workers or open other kinds of shops; however, all of this is done illegally as well. The majority of the migrant workers work 10 to 15 hours a day both day and night depending on the type of employment they have. Few have day offs other than when they have to do their monthly visa runs or on important public holidays when certain businesses choose to close.

To be engaged in employment as illegal migrant workers in Thailand literally comes with a price. Not only do they have to pay off immigration officials since the moment they enter the country,³² virtually everyone has to pay off the various local police officials either directly or through their employers in order to be allowed to work. Payments range anywhere from 300 baht/month/official to several thousand baht. Migrant workers report that despite paying off local officials, many still get arrested when the police from the higher level or migration police come to make their raids. Some police officials arrest Vietnamese workers not necessarily to enforce the law, but simply to take a bribe before letting them go. Bribes are not only taken on the premises where the arrests take place, but often times even after they have been taken to the police station. In the case that the arrested have been transferred to the immigration department, then bail fees need to be paid before being released. The subsequent trial often leads to a fine and expulsion from the

³² Although Vietnamese entering Thailand at various land border checkpoints declare that they are tourists, but the immigration officials well know that they are not, and thus takes advantage of the situation in order to take bribes for stamping the passport allowing them to enter the country.

country coupled with the violator's name appearing on the blacklist. For those who manage to not get themselves arrested, more money is shelved out when they make their monthly visa-runs in order to extend their stay in the country.

The fact that Vietnamese migrant workers are engaging in employment illegally in Thailand also means that they are not entitled to any benefits bestowed upon other workers. Some have reported having been abused or forced to work long hours without fair compensation. Many have been cheated by their employers who refuse to pay them for the work that they have done. When treated unjustly, Vietnamese workers are not able to resort to legal means to demand justice for themselves. When facing illness, Vietnamese workers must take care of all their medical expenses, unlike migrant workers from other countries who are legal and entitled to medical benefits. There have been situations in which Vietnamese workers became seriously ill or experienced accidents in which medical bills came up to hundreds of thousands of baht, which the patients and their families must borrow from friends or ask for donations in order to pay the hospital.

Social and Spiritual Life of Vietnamese Migrant Workers

Needless to say, Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand face many constraints in term of social and spiritual life. The majority have to work long hours. Some who manage to find the time and energy take on second jobs in order to earn extra income. Thus, they have little time for leisure and relaxation. Unlike in their homeland where Vietnamese are often found spending hours at a time in coffee shops or “quan nhậu” (eating venues specializing in food and alcohol), Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand have little time or means for such activities. Going out with friends can only take place once in a while to celebrate birthdays or other special occasions. Social gatherings mostly take place in karaoke venues, bar-b-que restaurants, and in someone's room. Many report working or living close to large shopping centers in Bangkok but have never stepped inside any of them. Thus the life of the majority of the Vietnamese migrant workers revolve around the place where they work and where they rent their accommodations, which is usually a one-room flat in an apartment complex. This is vastly different from the lifestyle that Vietnamese migrant workers experience in their homeland. Virtually all the Vietnamese working in Thailand come from the rural countryside of Vietnam where life revolves around the extended family and community with close knit relationships providing important social and emotional support for them in their lives. In addition, for young people family and community are especially essential in providing structure and guidance in ongoing formation as members of the family and society.

Vietnamese migrant workers of Catholic background grow up in an even more structured environment than their non-Catholic counterparts. In all the Catholic parishes in rural Vietnam, the day begins very early with church. In most places, every day the first bell rings at about 4 in the morning followed by hymns that are broadcasted through the church's sound system that could be heard throughout the entire village. Soon after, prayer recitation may be heard in the church followed by morning Mass. By 5.30 in the morning, people would be on their way home, take

their breakfast and begin their day either of work or school. In most churches, weekday Masses are nearly full if not full. Church bells also ring in the evening to call everyone to come for prayer before resting for the night. In some places, there is also praying the Divine Mercy everyday in the afternoon. Remarkably, attendance to Mass and morning or evening prayers is not only seen among adults and the elderly, but children and youth are equally present in these liturgies. Participation in church life also includes joining in various groups, and also giving time and energy to the tasks of teaching catechism, cleaning the church, and even building the church, which in the last thirty years has been going on in the majority of parishes in Vietnam. Giving time and energy to these church activities is almost always a voluntary service seen as the responsibility of a parish member, no matter what age group.

Despite how life revolves around the family, community, and church (for Catholics) for Vietnamese migrant workers in their homeland, the situation is nearly opposite when they come to Thailand. Here the young men and women mostly live on their own, with friends, with brothers and sisters or with relatives. However, there is virtually no supervision from traditional adult figures such as parents, community leaders and parish priests. For Catholic workers, the role of the church in their life is minimal with the vast majority only attending Sunday Mass some of the time and never attending weekday Mass at all. There are four main reasons for the low rate of church attendance among Vietnamese Catholic migrant workers in Thailand. First, for some, the church is not located close to where they live and work which provides little motivation for them to go. Not only is it time consuming but it can also be costly. This is unlike in their homeland where going to church meant walking a few hundred meters or a few minutes on motorbike. In many cases, the church is located so far away that it is simply not possible to attend Mass. As a minute minority in an overwhelmingly Buddhist country, Thailand's Catholic churches are often not found where they are needed. Second, the Mass schedule does not always fit into the work and rest schedule of the workers, and making time for Mass means that some sacrifices need to be made in one or the other. For some, their work schedule simply does not allow for taking time off to go to church even for a few hours on Sunday. Third, a number of Vietnamese Catholic workers make time for the monthly Vietnamese language Masses but do not attend the Thai language Masses because of language barriers. Many report being bored when attending Mass in a language which they do not fully understand. While the majority of Vietnamese workers can manage some conversational Thai, and some are quite fluent in speaking and listening, but the high language used in the liturgy is not accessible to most of the Vietnamese. Finally and perhaps the most significant reason is that as young people who are living on their own detached from the discipline and structure of family, community, and parish, not going to church becomes a real option that they can make for themselves. One may describe this attitude as lack of faith and devotion, too much desire to make money, or pure laziness; nonetheless, it is a prevalent attitude among many of the Catholic Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand. It must be noted that no matter how they behave here in Thailand, as soon as they return to their homeland for various

occasions, they fall immediately back into the former pattern of behavior which is characteristically different from when they are away from home.

Thus, examining the social and spiritual aspects of the life of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, we see that there are great discrepancies between the present environment in which they live and that of in their homeland. When speaking of a community of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, we see that this group of people living in diaspora faces many obstacles when it comes to their ability to form a community. First, Vietnamese migrant workers are spread all over the four regions of Thailand from Phuket in the south to Chiangmai in the north. Of course, the number of workers in the central and northeast regions of Thailand is greater, but even then they are still spread out over different provinces and districts and are not concentrated in any particular area. There are, however, pockets of Vietnamese doing similar work concentrated in a particular part of a district or town. Second, community building for Vietnamese migrant workers is difficult because they have limited time and means in order to go about. The majority work 10 to 15 hours a day, every day of the week, and earning anywhere from 300 to 1000 baht depending on the type of work. However, a taxi ride going somewhere may take up half a day's income. Thus, not only are they limited in time but also the financial means to interact with people not staying close to them. Third, to build and maintain a community needs leaders. This is not easy for Vietnamese migrant workers who come to Thailand primarily in order to find employment to support themselves and their family. Few have the time and interest to pursue social goals that would take away from their ability to earn an income. Also, while among Vietnamese workers, there are older and younger members, the age discrepancy within the group is not extremely high. Thus, the "elder" figures usually amount to "older brother" or "older sister" which commands less respect than the more traditional figures who are much older. There is also a mentality of "I am an illegal migrant worker just like everybody else" which prevents individuals from taking initiative or accepting the role of community leader. Finally, one of the greatest obstacles in building community for Vietnamese migrant workers is their illegal status. Because Vietnamese workers do not have work permits, they must try to keep a low profile in order to limit the risk of being arrested. Nonetheless, arrests of Vietnamese workers continually take place, especially in periods when there are government directives to tackle the issue of illegal immigrants. In mid-2014, for example, when the military government took over, a campaign to drive out illegal migrant workers was forcefully carried out causing hundreds of thousands to flee the country, among them Vietnamese as well as Cambodians and Burmese who failed to register for permits. In the months of June, July, and August, nearly all the Vietnamese workers returned to their homelands as arrests were going on everywhere and even the local police who took bribes in order to "protect" the workers told them directly that it was out of their power to interfere with the work of the military. The "exodus" took place again in September 2015 with the government's decision to put a halt to visa runs. Episodic campaigns such as these as well as the ongoing regular arrests that take place on a daily basis create a great deal of instability for the life Vietnamese migrant workers, which by its very nature

already contains a great deal of instability. Changing jobs and places to live takes place very often, as well as the phenomenon of traveling back to Vietnam and waiting out for the difficult period to pass before returning to Thailand once more. Needless to say, community building is extremely difficult when its members have to change jobs and move residence every few weeks or months.

Social Media as an Instrument for Community Building

As discussed above, the life of the Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand revolves primarily around work and rest, thus negatively impacting their opportunity for building social and communal life. However, despite tremendous limitations, there are efforts to rectify the situation in different measures. The most notable can be seen among workers of Catholic background. In recent years, one notices the appearance of about 20 groups of Vietnamese Catholics in different districts of Bangkok and surrounding provinces and regions where members gather either monthly or periodically for Mass celebrated in their language. The priests who celebrate these Masses are of Vietnamese background, and either come from Vietnam or from other countries, but are now working or studying in Thailand. With the presence of greater number of Vietnamese priests and religious in the country, there is a more active effort to organize and support Catholic workers in spiritual matters as well as other issues related to their social and personal lives. For the majority of the Catholic groups who are formed and maintained with the help of Vietnamese priests and religious, and with the support of the local Thai pastor, they are able to organize monthly Vietnamese language Masses as well as other activities such as group retreats, gatherings, and cultural celebrations. Although ministry for Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand began well over a decade ago, it has only been in the last three to four years that it has grown to the extent that the presence of Vietnamese migrant workers and Vietnamese language Mass is a rather familiar sight, especially in the Bangkok archdiocese where the majority of the groups were formed.

The growth of the ministry for Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, although not a direct result of, paralleled with a particular phenomenon that has been taking place within the Vietnamese population, especially the youth. This phenomenon is the increasing popularity and use of social media, in particular Facebook. In recent years, Facebook has gained much popularity in Vietnam. There are about 30 million Facebook users in Vietnam, of which 75% fall in the age group of 18-34. Vietnam is also one of Facebook's fastest growing markets in the world. Vietnamese spend an average of 2.5 hours on Facebook each day, twice the time watching television. About 20 million Vietnamese log on to Facebook each day, and even a number of prominent government officials have their own profile pages.³³ Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand fall in the age group where Facebook is most popular and can be seen in their prevalent use of the social

³³ Thanh Nien News, "Vietnam's Facebook users jump to 30 million," accessed January 14, 2016, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/tech/vietnams-facebook-users-jump-to-30-million-46876.html>



network. Many report using Facebook up to five or six hours a day during working hours as well as after work. Because Vietnamese migrant workers work both day and night shifts depending on the type of employment, one finds them online in every hour of the day. This is evidenced by the fact that the writer of this article receives Facebook messages from Vietnamese migrant workers at almost any time that he logs into his account. For Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, Facebook is not only a way to share photos, thoughts, and keep connected with friends and family, it is also a source of news and entertainment because many news articles and video clips are shared on Facebook.

It is due to Facebook's prevalence in the life of Vietnamese migrant workers that it has been shown to have a distinct role in the process of community building of this group. When searching through the social network, beside individual profile pages, one sees numerous pages created with groups and communities in mind. For example, there are Facebook pages called "Vietnamese community in Thailand," "Vietnamese in Thailand," "Ha Tinh People in Thailand," and so on. There are also religious community and group pages such as "Association of Vietnamese Catholics in Thailand," "Vietnamese Catholic Youth in Thailand," as well as dozens of group pages that include as part of their names "Vietnamese Catholic Group in" followed by a particular district or province in Thailand where the group is active. The intent of these pages is clear by much of the content posted on them. They are meant to be places where members can go to share information or post questions related to life and work in Thailand. They are places where people could advertise services that they provide such as transportation for visa runs or more recently, services that helped people to register for work permit. Unfortunately, due to the unregulated nature of some of the pages, it is not possible to judge whether the services advertised are legitimate or are scams. When the Vietnamese New Year Holiday also known as Tet approached, one could see advertisements of bus services that picked passengers up in Bangkok and took them all the way back to Ha Tinh and Nghe An, where the vast majority of the workers come from.

Unlike the somewhat free-for-all non-religious pages, the Catholic pages are more strictly administered. The majority of the content on these pages are announcements of Mass schedules and photographs of church-related activities. In some pages, people share spiritual readings and pictures for the benefit of all the members. The community page of the Association of Vietnamese Catholics in Thailand is seen as the official source of information for Vietnamese language Masses which take place at various locations each Sunday. In the past, before the rise of Facebook's popularity among the Vietnamese workers, announcement of Masses would take place mostly by word of mouth. However, Facebook has become the fastest and cheapest way to publicize activities to the community. Moreover, not only basic information such as date, time and place could be announced, detailed programs as well as directions on how to get to the place where the event is organized could also be given. It is due to this sort of publicity that the Masses organized by the Association of Vietnamese Catholics in Thailand on important occasions such as Easter, Christmas or the Assumption of Mary saw attendance of anywhere from a 1000 to 2000 people. The small group Masses that take place in various churches on a

week to week basis see attendance from 50 to 300 people. Certainly the ability to organize these groups and activities depend on many factors, and not simply due to the rise of social networking. These factors include the presence of a more organized and active team of Vietnamese priests and religious involved in the work, the greater awareness and support of the Thai Catholic Church in responding to the pastoral needs of Vietnamese migrant workers, and better skill by the Vietnamese migrant workers themselves in dealing with visa issues that allow them to travel about more safely. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to ignore the role of Facebook as an effective instrument contributing to the efforts of community building and maintenance by the Catholic migrant workers.

The role of Facebook social network in community building for Vietnamese migrant workers can most be seen clearly in time of crisis. On June 1, 2014 a caravan of five minibuses was carrying nearly 80 Vietnamese youth as well as a Dominican priest from Bangkok to the northeastern province of Nong Bua Lamphu about 600 kilometers away in order to attend a three day camp. The camp was an annual event that gathered Vietnamese youth living and working in various parts of Thailand for three days of activities, games, sharing and spiritual renewal. However, when the Bangkok group reached Chaiyaphum province, 100 kilometers yet from their final destination, one of the minibuses crashed head-on into a truck and instantly caught on fire. The driver of the minibus, who fell asleep at the wheel, died in the accident along with 13 of the passengers, one of them the Dominican priest and leader of the caravan, Fr. James Hanh Vu. All died from being burnt beyond recognition that required DNA tests in order to identify the victims. Only two of the passengers miraculously survived. The news of the accident instantly appeared on Facebook, for better or for worse, along with photos of the horrific accident with a smoldering vehicle and blackened corpses. The information was posted by none other than the fellow Vietnamese youth in the caravan whose instant reaction to the accident was to let everyone know what had just happened. The news and images of the accident not only were seen by the Vietnamese in Thailand and Vietnam, but throughout the world. That day, family and friends of the victims instantly made their way to Srinakharin Hospital in Khon Kaen Province where the bodies were taken, and a fund raising effort would quickly begin. Individuals and groups initiated the effort to collect donations in order to help the families of the victims. Through the social network, news and information about the process of dealing with the accident and the effort to bring the bodies of the victims back to Vietnam continued to be shared. Words of consolation as well as support came from both inside and outside of Thailand. The traffic accident of 2014 was by far the most tragic event that had taken place for the Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand. With the use of social network, they were not only able to get information regarding what had taken place, but also to reach out to the families of the victims. Though tragic events such as the one described above is not common, death and injuries caused by accidents occur quite regularly for Vietnamese workers in Thailand. Most of these accidents are traffic accidents that happen while they are working or simply going about. When these incidents take place, not only does Facebook become the means to relate the information (oftentimes to the family of

the victim whose friends do not know or cannot get in contact with), but also the way to ask for assistance with support with the various costs.

In addition to its importance in times of crisis, Facebook social network is also important in time of opportunity. After many months of negotiating and delay, finally in July 2015, the governments of Thailand and Vietnam signed the Memorandum of Understanding of labor cooperation between the two countries.³⁴ It was then reported in November in the Thai media that registration would begin in every city and province on December 1, 2015 and would last 30 days.³⁵ The conditions set out by the Ministry of Labor of Thailand were clear, though not entirely explainable. Only four types of employment were listed for registration—construction, fishery, restaurant service, and domestic help. Moreover, every worker must have a Thai employer and a work contract.³⁶ Finally, a condition that baffled and confused many people was that those who qualified for registration must have entered Thailand legally before the August 10, 2015 and whose visa had already expired.

If the conditions were not always clearly understood by the Vietnamese migrant workers for a variety of reasons, the process of how to register was equally confusing for people who had never been through it. Thus, the Facebook pages of the Embassy of Vietnam in Bangkok, Catholic priests, and community groups became flooded with questions of those trying to make sense of the Thai government's resolution. The majority of the questions came from individuals who wanted to know whether they qualified for registration, and if so where to begin. At the same time that credible people in the community were trying to supply official information to the workers, numerous people saw a money making opportunity and advertised registration services for both those who qualified as well as those who only partially qualified. For example, people who advertised the services claimed that for a fee of 7,000 – 10,000 baht, someone who did not have an employer or did not work in one of the four types of permissible jobs, but met other conditions could be registered. The desired result would be to have a one-year visa and work permit as well as health insurance card, in which the total cost would normally be 5,100 baht if the person did it on his own. Nonetheless, most of these advertised services proved to be scams as many who signed up for them either did not get anything or only got a visa but not work permit or health insurance.³⁷ The people behind these scams both Vietnamese and Thai, took advantage of the lack of knowledge and desperation of the Vietnamese workers in order to make a profit. Thus, part of the job of community leaders during this time was to create awareness of the risk of the scams and to minimize the number of victims. In addition, updated and correct

³⁴ National News Bureau of Thailand, "Thai and Vietnamese PMs to co-chair 3rd joint cabinet retreat on 23 July," accessed January 18, 2016, http://thainews.prd.go.th/website_en/news/news_detail/WNPOL5807160010017.

³⁵ The Nation, "จัดทะเบียนแรงงานเวียดนาม 5.ค." accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.nationtv.tv/main/content/social/378478099/>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Some workers were even given fake visa stamps on their passports, and ended up getting arrested when they left the country through a migration checkpoint.

information was greatly needed because the process of registration implemented by the various agencies of Thailand was extremely inconsistent. The same agency but in different provinces gave different responses to Vietnamese workers who came to apply for a quota, the first step in the process. Moreover, even when applying for a quota was completed on the first day and health exams and health insurance purchased could be easily finished within the following week, it was not until 3 days before the final day of the registration period that the Immigration Bureau could begin issuing visas. Previous to that, the only answer that the Immigration officers provided to the applicants was that they had received no directive from the Ministry of the Interior and therefore could not issue any visas. Undoubtedly, the lack of uniformity and tardiness in the work of the Immigration Bureau caused an already confusing and stressful situation to be even more so. During this period, while Facebook was used to deceive naïve people, it was also an important instrument in keeping people informed and minimizing the number of victims.

Conclusion

In this paper, it was hypothesized that the social network, in particular Facebook, can serve as a means to unify migrant workers living in diaspora with a variety of limitations. It was also hypothesized that social network can be of great assistance and support in times of crisis and stress. Finally, it can be an important tool for community and religious leaders serving migrant groups. Through the examination of the case of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, it can be seen these three hypotheses are supported in various ways. First, due to the dispersed nature of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, a sense of community which requires coming together on a regular basis is extremely difficult, with the exception of Catholics who attend Mass because of their religious devotion. Legal and financial considerations, as well as the lack of people to organize events make these gatherings also nearly impossible. Thus, for the overall Vietnamese migrant community in Thailand, Facebook serves as the thread that allow for keeping up to date on things that are taking place in the community. At the same time, when activities or important events occur that involves community members, the most effective way to publicize the information and encourage attendance is through the use of social media. Thus, for religious and community leaders, social media is an instrument that supports their work in reaching out to the community, as well as a way that the migrant workers can reach them in order to seek information and advice. Admittedly, the social media has been used to deceive people on numerous occasions, it has also been a reliable instrument for creating a sense of community and an effective tool for community support by those who have the interest of the community in mind.

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