

## CHAPTER

# 8

# Truly Liberal and Immensely Oppressive? The Experiences of Returned Queer Vietnamese Migrants from Japan

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## Introduction

It was a hot autumn afternoon when I met Dat for the first time in a small outdoor coffee shop in Hanoi. While the customers sitting next to our table grew tired sitting in the humid weather, our conversation lasted until the evening shift when the waitress came to ask whether we wanted our fourth drinks. Dat had a lot to share. He had known about his sexual orientation from early childhood but had hidden it from his family and friends, fearing being discriminated against. Dat wanted to “escape” from such a “source of oppression” in Vietnam after graduating from high school, and chose Japan as a place to migrate to:

The image of Japan in my head at that time was very idealistic: safe, stable economic conditions. And I thought the view of Japanese people on LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> issues would be more open and tolerant than in other Asian countries ... So I hoped that I would be free from all the fears if I went to Japan.

After four years of studying in Japan, Dat “wanted to escape again,” but this time from Japan. Upon coming back to Vietnam, he came out to his family and friends and openly embraced his identity and lifestyle as a gay man. Indeed, Dat was not the only one who decided to return to the place where he had initially run away from.

The movement of people across borders involves a wide range of social practices, through which migrants’ motivations, desires, and expectations are constantly negotiated (Carling and Collins 2018). While economic and labor practices, education alternatives, political engagements and family-related issues have formed a large body of literature, the sexual dimension has historically been marginalized, and is still typically absent in the mainstream sociological studies of transnational migration (Carrillo 2017; Manalansan IV 2006). Some scholars have recently established the connections between migration and changing sexual practices, desires, and identities, but the typical and ideal migrant is still considered to be heterosexual (Luibhéid 2008). The experiences of non-heterosexual migrants, therefore, remain inadequately studied. In the few studies that investigate queer migration, sexual minority migrants’ mobility trajectories are commonly presented as unidirectional. In particular, studies on global flows of queer migrants predominantly feature movements from “oppressive” destinations (mostly rural areas, in developing countries in the Global South) to more “progressive” ones (mostly urban areas, in developed countries in the Global North), where queer practices, identities, and subjectivities are enabled and realized (Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014). While migration trajectories and outcomes are complex and contingent on divergent factors, the reverse migration movements among non-heterosexual migrants have yet to receive sufficient attention.

This chapter aims to address these gaps by examining the experiences of returned queer Vietnamese migrants who used to live in Japan. It considers sexuality, in the forms of sexual subjectivities, desires, practices, and identities, as tangled in economic, education, or family-oriented issues to facilitate migrants’ migration decision-making and (im)mobility trajectories. Lived experiences before, during, and after migration of queer migrants would be investigated to make sense of the negotiations and processes of return migration, in which sexuality emerges as an important feature. The chapter begins with a review of existing literature on sexualities, migration, and mobilities, followed by explanations of research design and methodology. Narratives of returned queer migrants who identify as gays and lesbians are then analyzed to unfold the ways in which these individuals negotiate their sexual, social, and spatial mobilities in tandem with relentlessly changing social landscapes and institutions in Vietnamese and Japanese societies. While the chapter acknowledges that there is a need to fully conceptualize sexuality in migration (Carrillo 2004), it does not advocate distinguishing

sexually motivated migrations from other forms of mobility, but rather leans toward the concept of tangled mobilities (Fresnoza-Flot and Liu-Farrer, this volume) to understand the complexities of return migration among queer individuals. The chapter ends with a theoretical discussion, in which original observations are examined through a “sexual field” perspective (Green 2008, 2014, 2015). Inspired by Bourdieusian field theory and Goffman’s analysis on situational presentation of self, a sexual field approach aims to explain desire, desirability, sexual practices, and the diverse power hierarchies involved in the process of negotiating sexualities in a contemporary collective sexual life. It assists our understanding of the ways in which queer former migrants negotiate their positions within different sexual fields through transnational migration between Vietnam and Japan. In addition, focusing the analytical lens on the spatial, sexual and social mobilities of returned queer migrants also questions common assumptions in international queer migration studies.

## **Sexualities and Queers on the Move**

While sexual desires and identities have always been important factors that trigger relocations, conventional migration studies used to conceal them with motivations that were perceived to be more rational. It was not until the late 1990s that a sexual and emotional turn in migration studies emerged, acknowledging intimacies, sexualities, and romance to be “at the heart of the migration decision making and behaviors” (Mai and King 2009: 296). The emphasis on sexual motives deviates from strict economist interpretations of migration motivations, and suggests that migration processes are more complicated and tangled than have been recognized in the past. In order to make clear the connection between individuals’ sexualities and migration, scholars have coined some specific terminologies. “Sexual migration,” for example, refers to journeys that are motivated both directly and indirectly by sexual identities, desires or behaviors of those who migrate (Cantú 2009; Carrillo 2004; Luibhéid 2008). Examining queers’ mobility trajectories in Australia, Gorman-Murray observes “queer migration,” which “occurs when the needs or desires on non-heterosexual identities, practices and performances are implicated in the process of displacement” (Gorman-Murray 2009: 443).

Imaginarities of contrasting sexual cultures and landscapes are also crucial in inciting migration. Many queers have chosen international relocation to avoid discrimination and stigmas in the home countries, to navigate specific life events, or to facilitate identity developments (Lewis 2014). In this sense, migration decisions are not limited to the search for material

and social advancement or involuntary displacement, but go beyond to highlight the multidimensionality of intimacy and pleasure-seeking migrant subjects (Manalansan IV 2006; Groes and Fernandez 2018). This perspective not only makes migration more humanized by giving significance to the pursuit of intimacies, emotions, and sexualities, but it also challenges the simplistic framing of migration's motivations and heterosexuality. Moreover, a focus on sexualities allows a deep understanding of migrants' social incorporation and the unfolding of social relations and structures of oppression, freedom, agencies, and hierarchies that contour migrants' negotiation of sexualities, identities, and collective belongings (Gorman-Murray 2007; Lewis and Naples 2014).

Other developments in migration studies that necessitate the need to consider sexualities in migration include the "transnational turn" and the "mobility turn." The transnational perspective developed in the early 1990s understands migration not as a permanent move from one country to another but rather a process taking place in social spaces that are constantly reworked and negotiated by migrants' simultaneous participation in multi-sited arenas (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Vertovec 2009). Migrants' previous ways of thinking about and practicing sexualities are not erased as they still actively maintain connections with families, loved ones, and communities back home. Transnational migration, therefore, involves the labor of negotiating with and making sense of new and old sexual behaviors and identities. It introduces migrants to more complex engagements with sexualities while simultaneously (re)imposing sexual constraints as a result of racial and social class discrimination, unsuitable working and living arrangements, and the surveillance of co-ethnic communities (Ahmad 2009; Cantú 2009; Hoang and Yeoh 2015).

Migration as a concept has been criticized for focusing too much on physical and spatial movements rather than on the interaction between actors, structures, and contexts (Groes and Fernandez 2018). Thus, the "mobility turn" advocates for the consideration of connected flux of human, materials, ideas, images, technologies and how such diverse mobilities are conditioned (Sheller and Urry 2006). Rather than seeing people crossing borders as a result of rational choices, the mobility approach incorporates journeys that are triggered by all sorts of motivation, including hopes, desires, images, symbols, and cultural practices. Hence, mobility scholars pay attention to the interconnections between divergent types of mobility to show that spatial and geographical movements are closely linked to intimacy, social structures, personal identities, status, and senses of belonging (Favell and Recchi 2011). Understanding mobility as being facilitated by and deeply entwined with gender, power, kinship, and sexuality, Groes and Fernandez conceptualize "intimate mobilities" as involving "all forms

of mobility shaped, implied or facilitated by bodily, sexual, affective or reproductive intimacy,” and thus encompassing other forms of mobility motivated by emotions, desires, or pleasures (2018: 1).

The sexual, transnational, and mobility turns have provided theoretical and methodological venture points for queer migration studies to explore how mobility can be tied to the pursuit of personal fulfillment among individuals of different sexual identities. Queer migration scholarship to date, however, tends to celebrate the post-migration sexual liberation or emancipation, and ignores the critical stances that migrants might have with the new environments. Furthermore, transnational queer migration literature has seen research depicting two specific patterns of movements. The first one focuses on the relocations from Asia and Latin America to the United States (Cantú 2009; Carillo and Fontdevila 2014; Hirano 2014). The second features journeys from Eastern Europe or the Middle East to Western Europe (Dhoest and Szulc 2016; Wimark 2016). Transnational queer migration is also commonly understood as unidirectional, stemming from the oppressive and backward Global South to the liberal and progressive Global North, where higher tolerance toward queerness and stronger legal protection for sexual minorities exist. This viewpoint not only disregards the variances in global queer movements but also reinforces the political dichotomies of East-West, North-South, and legacies of colonialism in migration studies. Besides, queer Asian migrants have mostly been examined in Western contexts, where structural factors such as white hostility and lingering colonialist aftereffects, degrading media representations, and hierarchies based on sex, gender, race, and class negatively impact their sexualities (Kong 2002; Han 2006; Hibbins 2005; Nguyen 2014). While there is a wide range of sexual ideologies and expressions in Asia, the ways in which queer Asian migrants negotiate their sexualities within Asian contexts have not been sufficiently studied. Consequently, queer migration studies have yet to fully engage with other areas of the world to deviate from the effects of US-centrism and Eurocentrism (Chiang and Wong 2017). As migrants' lives are curtailed by various social structures in both home and host societies, it is necessary to touch on how homosexuality is perceived in Japan and Vietnam in order to understand the ways in which queer Vietnamese migrants negotiate their sexuality and mobility trajectories in different phases of migration.

## **Queerness in Contemporary Japan and Vietnam**

The perceptions of non-heterosexuality in Japan have diversely changed from early modern times to contemporary society. In premodern Japan,

there was abundant material on homosexuality, and non-heterosexual love was socially accepted (or ignored) to a certain degree. Same-sex love during this time featured mostly male homosexuality in the forms of cross-gender homosexuality and cross-generation homosexuality (Lunsing 2001). After the Meiji period in the nineteenth century, however, Japan embarked on a program of Westernization, in which Western modernity and culture were major sources of influence on how non-heterosexuality was perceived. Homosexuality was then stigmatized and considered in a very negative light (McLelland, Suganuma, and Welker 2007). After World War II and during the American Occupation, Japanese perceptions of sexuality underwent further Western influences. Even though homosexuality was still regarded as a “taboo of urban society” in general public discourses, gay media started to proliferate. The Japanese gay media in the postwar era, however, heavily fetishized white Western bodies and Western gay culture, leading to the erasure of black and non-Japanese Asian bodies from the consciousness of Japanese gay subcultures (Mackintosh 2010; Suganuma 2012). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a “gay boom” in Japanese culture due to increased flows of global queer consumerism and the emergence of queer subcultures in the country. Such a boom has not only given a greater voice to previously sidelined sexual minorities but has also widely disseminated a perception of a tolerant Japanese society toward queerness (McLelland 2005). However, this perception, circulated through certain media and cultural products, does not necessarily represent the lives of sexual minorities in Japanese society. There is thus a contradictory discourse on non-heterosexuality in Japan; although the country can be seen as queer-friendly via popular culture and a few governmental policies, queerness is still considered as something negative in the daily lives of most people (Dasgupta 2017; Kawasaki 2018).

In addition, despite the growing population of foreign residents in the country, it is often assumed that most of the discourses on sexual orientation and gender identification in Japan “concern only ethnically Japanese members of sexual minority groups” (Suganuma 2017: 248). A few scholars have pointed out that the label of “foreigner” might foster contrasting sexual connotations (Kazawa and Kawaguchi 2003; Paquin 2014). For example, while the Western-oriental gay lovers might find it easy to enjoy homosexual encounters in the country (Suganuma 2012; McLelland 2000; McLelland and Dasgupta 2005), foreigners of Asian descent might have different and even contradictory experiences (Baudinette 2016; Quero 2014). It is important to note that the majority of foreign migrants in Japan come from neighboring Asian countries (Liu-Farrer 2020), and there is therefore a need to further inquire into how queer Asian migrants negotiate their sexualities in Japanese society.

The last ten years have witnessed a rapid acceleration in the number of Vietnamese migrants in Japan. The transnational flow of migrants from Vietnam to Japan started to increase in the early 2010s, and by the end of 2019, Vietnamese have been the third largest group of foreign residents in Japan<sup>2</sup> (Ministry of Justice 2020). Although numerous Vietnamese express economic or educational rationales when they migrate to Japan (Liu-Farrer and Tran 2019), other motivations should not be downplayed. As Japanese culture has enjoyed remarkable popularity in Vietnam in the last decade, going to Japan is appealing not only for migrants seeking to accumulate their economic and cultural capital but also for those wishing to satisfy their cultural curiosity. Moreover, as cultural representations of sexualities have the ability to cast effects on migration decisions, the widespread images of the Japanese “gay boom” and a queer-tolerant Japan invite relocation consideration among Vietnamese sexual minorities.

Similar to Japan, the ways in which non-heterosexuality is perceived in Vietnam have gone through considerable changes. Despite of the fact that there has been no law that explicitly criminalizes homosexuality, several discriminatory regulations have existed. During the 1990s and early 2000s, it was common for the official media and public discourses to associate homosexuality as one of the “social evils,”<sup>3</sup> alongside crime, prostitution, gambling, and moral degradability. The Vietnamese Law of Marriage and Family in 2000 even forbade marriage between same-sex individuals. According to a report conducted in 2009 that covered more than five hundred press articles, the image of the LGBTQ community in Vietnam was negatively biased and represented (iSEE and AJC 2009). Consequently, the everyday life of sexual minorities in Vietnam used to be largely affected by homophobia and heterosexism across institutions such as the family, the science of sexuality in medicine and psychology, and the state (Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2010; Newton 2017).

In recent years, however, the ways in which LGBTQ issues and rights are perceived in Vietnam have enjoyed a swift change thanks to constant advocacies by civil society organizations. In 2015, the Vietnamese LGBTQ movement achieved remarkable successes as the same-sex marriage ban was removed, and a passage of law was approved that allowed individuals who undergo gender reassignment surgery to register under their preferred gender. As the law changed, same-sex marriages mushroomed, and the LGBTQ community became more visible in daily life (Vu, Do, and Chu 2019). Nowadays, Pride parades happen frequently in big Vietnamese cities, many celebrities come out in public, and some popular reality shows<sup>4</sup> have become public platforms for LGBTQ awareness. Social media has also empowered more critical engagements with global and local LGBTQ rights and issues. The transformation of institutional and public discourses on

non-heterosexuality in Vietnam indeed suggests the need to consider the experiences of queer people who live through such changes. Many individuals featured in this chapter are in such cases, as they negotiated their mobility trajectories (both spatially and socially) in accordance with the gradual changes in how queerness is perceived in Vietnam.

## **Methodological Approach**

Aiming to uncover the tangling of sexual, spatial, and social mobilities conditioned by social contexts and structures, this chapter examines the experiences of return migration among homosexual Vietnamese migrants, and the ways in which they make sense of their trajectories. The chapter employs the life-history interview, which contemplates migrants' own encounters, subjectivities, and reflections over the life course. As a life-history interview accounts for respondents' shifting situational practices and identifications, the method attends to how migration, as a multifaceted reality, is imagined, desired, experienced, and negotiated with regards to temporal and spatial variances. Moreover, a life-history interview could reveal the emotional dimensions of social experiences, and therefore support the making sense of migrants' "sexual stories" where sexualities and migration are formed, challenged and (re)negotiated (Carpenter 2015; Plummer 1995). From an ethical perspective, a life-history interview enables a more balanced power dynamic between the researcher and the researched, because participants can actively shape the inquiry direction without having their experiences framed in the researcher's agenda and words.

The empirical data of this chapter derives from twelve interviews that I conducted in Vietnam in 2018 and 2019 with nine returned Vietnamese migrants. One of them identifies as a lesbian woman and the rest identify themselves as gay men. The respondents' ages ranged from the mid-twenties to late-thirties at the time of interviews, and they had lived in different parts of Japan for three to seventeen years before returning to Vietnam. I initially met two participants via the introductions of friends on Facebook, and then got to know the rest via snowballing. In qualitative interviews, the researcher's positionalities and identities in relation to those of participants could considerably affect the interviews' accesses and outcomes. Ryan (2015) describes such an encounter as a "qualitative dance" (5), in which factors such as race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, class, and religion of both parties are "ingredients in a complex and active mix of identities." During the processes of recruiting and interviewing participants, my positionality as a Vietnamese researcher from a German university conducting research in both Japan and Vietnam, my



research goals, and the different facets of my identity were revealed. Such practice aimed to create a “third positionality,” which is neither an entire “insider” nor a complete “outsider” to the group of research participants, and is based on the characteristics and markers of identity that are actively managed in the research setting (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014). For instance, while I share a common ethnicity, nationality, and the experience of living in Japan with research participants, my social backgrounds and trajectories are different from theirs. Therefore, a third positionality could transcend the regularly assumed similarities between people from the same ethnicity or nationality.

Apart from such positionality, I actively offered participants information on my own sexual identities and experiences to foster open interactions and rapport, as well as to balance the power asymmetries between the researcher and the researched. It should be noted that while participants were open with me about their sexual identities, they were not necessarily “out” to the public. I therefore explicitly asked participants to choose interview settings in which they felt the most comfortable. While all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, Japanese phrases and words were sometimes used by participants to refer to specific situations or terminologies. Interviews were recorded with the consensus of the participants, then transcribed and translated by me, using pseudonyms. In the upcoming sections, the chapter unfolds the tangle in participants’ return migration processes chronologically, from choosing Japan as a migration destination, to living in Japan, and finally to returning to Vietnam.

## **Japan as an Alluring “Escape” Destination**

There are three mainstream explanations for the drastic growth of the Vietnamese population in Japan. First, as a result of the growing investment flows from Japan to Vietnam, several Japanese firms have been opening branch offices in Vietnam. Going to Japan to either study or gain work experience is thus a strategy for many Vietnamese youths to compete in the labor market. Second, international education as a migration industry has enthusiastically channeled Vietnamese students to Japan with simplified procedures and low requirements (Liu-Farrer and Tran 2019). Last but not least, there is still a big wage gap between Vietnam and Japan, which allows migration brokers to advertise about the possibility of earning a salary three to four times higher if one chooses to migrate to Japan. These three reasons, however, are presented as instrumental and economic-oriented, and cannot fully explain why certain groups of Vietnamese migrants choose to migrate to Japan. The queer former migrants’ narratives in this chapter

indeed indicate that economic rationales, educational motivations and sexual imperatives tangle in the impulse of migration.

Dat, who was introduced earlier, recalled that one of his first exposures to homosexuality when growing up in Vietnam was from *Yaoi*, a Japanese manga sub-genre that predominantly features male homosexual love. The representations of sexuality in *Yaoi* manga and the genre's popularity gave Dat the impression that homosexuality was not only tolerated but also *Ninki* (popular) in Japan. Similarly, Thuy, a 24-year-old lesbian who studied in Japan for three years, thought that Japan was an alluring destination for the LGBTQ community after seeing pictures of Japanese Pride parades and LGBTQ-themed manga on the Internet. For both Dat and Thuy, the perception of an LGBTQ-friendly Japan stood in stark contrast with their pre-migration experiences. It should be noted that the participants in this chapter all started to be aware of their sexualities during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when homosexuality was still negatively characterized in Vietnamese society. Consequently, many of them report being exposed to homophobic attitudes and behaviors, and having to hide their true sexual identities. Dat, for instance, lived in constant fear of being discovered as gay during his teenage years: "At that time, I was scared, because of the domestic media. Whenever they mentioned about homosexuality, it would be about stealing, raping, and killing ... or *benh hoan* (perverts) ... or *quai go* (freaks)." Such media representations had indeed led to homophobic behaviors. Tai, an interpreter in his late thirties, described his experience during middle school and high school:

I knew about my sexuality at a relatively early age ... And somebody might have known somehow, and then they teased me ... From then until when I was twenty years old and went to Japan, it had been very tough being different from others and having to *gong ganh* (hold up) in order to hide it.

The word *gong ganh* that Tai used refers to hiding one's true identities and complying with heteronormative expectations by performing heteronormative behaviors. It has a similar meaning to the Western notion of being "closeted," and suggests an extremely exhausting process. From Goffman's (1956) self-presentation perspective, non-heterosexual Vietnamese had to always carry out heteronormative gender performances in the "front stage" of their social interactions with others, and could only reveal themselves in the "backstage" where very few people can see. Migration, therefore, could be contemplated as a strategy for some Vietnamese queers to express their sexualities more freely without facing homophobic or heterosexist sentiments. Tai, for example, saw migration as an escape chance:

I wanted to migrate because I wished to get away from Vietnamese society, from all the stuffiness, the closeness ... Sexuality was a matter at that time that urged me to find a new environment, to escape. So when I knew that I had got a scholarship to study in Japan, I went immediately without thinking twice.

The sexual dimension in migrants' social lives is not just bound to the migration decision-making process. Even if sex-related concerns do not motivate migration in the first place, they are still deliberately and strategically considered throughout the course of migration (Baas 2018; Carrillo 2004, 2017; Liu-Farrer 2010). After graduating from a university in Vietnam, Lam, a thirty-year-old IT (Information Technology) worker in Ho Chi Minh City, initially planned to enroll in a language school in Tokyo for only two years to improve his Japanese skills. Toward the end of his study, Lam's boyfriend in Vietnam cheated on him, and Lam decided not to return as previously intended. His stay in Tokyo eventually lasted for four more years, during which he obtained a master's degree and worked for a Japanese IT company. Although structural factors such as education and job opportunities inevitably mattered in conditioning Lam's trajectory, his sexuality contributed to the decision to stay longer.

In general, Japan is perceived to offer several advantages and, thus, an attractive migration destination for queer Vietnamese individuals. Together with the possibilities for economic and educational advancement, the perception of Japan as a liberal country with a high tolerance for sexual diversity plays a salient role in facilitating migration. The triggering effect for migration among the participants of this chapter is more potent when such an image of Japan was juxtaposed with the homophobic sentiments they had experienced in Vietnam in the past.

## **Truly Liberal? Negotiating Queer Sexualities in Japan**

While queer migration literature often celebrates the post-migration sexual emancipation, it is not necessarily what most migrants experience. Migration could allow queer migrants' dreams of sexual freedom to be realized, but it can also bring about isolation or social exclusion. For instance, although migrants are more likely to socialize with their co-ethnics for practical reasons, ethnic communities could be a double-edged sword and curtail migrants' sexual identities and behaviors (Carrillo 2017). In contrast to the expectation to express his sexuality more freely after migrating, Dat still had to make excessive efforts to hide his sexual orientation in Japan. As the city where he studied was small, and people in the Vietnamese community there

tended to know each other, Dat tried to avoid being “out” involuntarily with fellow Vietnamese who were “very fond of homophobic jokes.” Indeed, he closeted himself for the whole four years that he studied in Japan, and paid extra attention to the ways he behaved in public to not appear too effeminate. After seeing many Japanese gay men consider getting married to women and having children, Dat realized that “(Japanese) people were not exposed that much to gender and sexual diversity.” Disappointed with the situation, Dat wished to move to Tokyo (though he never did) because he imagined that amid the cold urban lifestyle of the capital “everybody just cares about their own stuff,” which would make the city “a good hiding place.” Dat’s observation aligns with the fact that performances of heteronormativity are still expected among sexual minorities in Japan, and adhering to such fondness is a common daily strategy that many have to employ (Dasgupta 2017).

In addition to the conservative attitudes toward sexual minorities, queer migrants in Japan have to simultaneously navigate discrimination based on xenophobia. They are consequently subjected to a “double layer of discrimination”: one is directed to their sexualities, and the other is boosted by their ethnicities or nationalities (Hibbins and Pease 2009). When Thuy (the aforesaid lesbian woman) first moved to a city in northern Japan for her undergraduate study, she disappointedly found out that very few students at her university were open about their sexual identities. The letdown was intensified when Thuy took part in a Pride parade in the city and saw several participants covering their faces with masks to avoid being identified. According to Thuy, many people whose faces were revealed were either foreigners or heterosexuals who wanted to show support. Such masking practices not only created a boundary between queers and non-queers, Japanese and non-Japanese, but also re-emphasized the homophobic and heterosexist barriers in Japanese society that Japanese people themselves have yet to overcome. Moreover, when Thuy tried using a dating app for lesbian women in Japan, she was made fully aware of her foreign status: “I was texting with this (Japanese) woman on the app, and of course, after a few sentences, she could tell that I am a *gaijin* (foreigner). She asked me where I am from. I texted back that I come from Vietnam, and she did not respond after that.”

Comparable incidents were experienced by other participants on online dating platforms, where their sexual mobility (in term of sexual desirability and identity) is dictated by nationality, social class, and certain sets of capital. Even with participants who could communicate in Japanese fluently, their status as Vietnamese still hindered the facilitation of intimacies with Japanese locals. Nghi, a gay man in his early thirties, told me that although he had had countless sexual encounters while living in Japan for five years, he was not “the type that Japanese (gay men) like.” The preferred “types”

for many Japanese gay men, Nghi says, would be either Japanese nationals or white foreigners, whereas other Asians, especially Southeast Asians and South Asians, would be looked down on and considered as undesirable. Because of such racialized preferences in the Japanese queer dating scenes, foreign migrants have to develop suitable strategies to put their foreignness in a more favorable light. Most of the time, such strategies involve presenting themselves as possessing positive Western traits. For example, Nghi focused on showing his English skills on gay dating apps in Japan: “You have to steer the conversations toward English, since it means nothing to them (Japanese users) that you can use Japanese fluently. Although Japanese is very hard, they take it for granted that you should be able to speak Japanese. But if you can speak English, that is something superior.” While English skill could be seen as an advantage, it is still important that migrants have to possess decent Japanese language skills in order to elevate their chances of finding sexual or intimate partners. Moreover, there are different queer dating apps catering to different user groups (Japanese, foreigners, tourists), and people choose the most suitable apps for their own needs, resources, and capabilities.

### **Immensely Oppressive? The (Sexual) Return of Queer Migrants to Vietnam**

Migration is an intersecting site of dynamic considerations and negotiations. As this chapter shows, spatial mobilities are triggered not only by structural and sociocultural elements but also by countless facets in an individual’s social life. Although emigration is dominant in migration literature, return migration patterns have started to attract scholarly attention. Similar to the determination to emigrate, the decision to return to the home country is characterized by tangling elements. Examining return migration patterns and experiences, therefore, widens the meanings of migration and mobility (Carling and Erdal 2014) and offers opportunities to critically reconsider common assumptions. For instance, while many non-heterosexual migrants are believed to migrate because of their sexualities, Hibbins (2005) observes that several heterosexual Chinese men wanted to go back home as their sexualities and masculinities were degraded after migrating to Australia. By contrast, Murray (2000) finds that some Martinican gays exchanged their sexual liberty in France for a non-racist and less stressful economic situation by returning home to Martinique, where most gays have to closet.

The decision to return and the post-migration experiences of queer Vietnamese migrants are shaped by a tangle of economic, familial, and

sexual factors in both Vietnamese and Japanese contexts. In particular, as Vietnam has been turning into a promising business site for Japanese firms, job opportunities at home for high-skilled workers who possess sufficient linguistic skills and cultural competencies have increased, especially in manufacturing, retailing, and IT industries. Working for those companies and earning a Japanese salary while living in Vietnam is indeed attractive, considering the more affordable cost of living. At the same time, the stressful working environment in Japan also makes migrants consider going back. Many who have worked in Japan mentioned how they disliked Japanese corporate culture, where there was “no work-life balance, no emotion between people, and too much gossip.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Japanese workplaces still remain ethnocentric, and offer limited career opportunities for foreign workers (Liu-Farrer and Shire 2020). Having worked for a Japanese technology firm for eight years, Tai saw no promotion chance for him because foreign workers were not trusted as much as Japanese in his company, “so I’d rather go back (to Vietnam),” he stated. Family-related concerns also motivate queer migrants to return. In the end, they still want to be closer to their families and to take care of their parents, which reflects a consistent traditional expectation for filial piety in contemporary Vietnam.

Sexuality, too, is a powerful driver facilitating return migration flows. The development of LGBTQ movements in Vietnam has fostered a more open public attitude toward sexual minorities. For participants who initially escaped Vietnam because of the oppressive environment for sexual minorities, such change was meaningful. Their idea of returning developed as a result of what they had experienced during home visit trips. Not only did they witness the changing public attitudes toward queerness but they also enjoyed more lively queer scenes and sexual experiences. Tai, the aforementioned translator in his late thirties, expressed that he felt more liberated when visiting Vietnam, which was in opposition to his limited sexual experiences in Japan: “I saw, wow, plenty of ‘fish’<sup>6</sup> on the gay dating app when I opened it in Vietnam.” He also thought that many potential dating or sexual partners were interested in him partly because he used to be abroad. The recent changes in how queerness and LGBTQ matters are perceived in Vietnam as well as the development of queer scenes in big cities therefore altered many participants’ perceptions of a sexually oppressive Vietnamese society that they had had in the past.

Upon returning to Vietnam, many participants came out to their families and friends, took part in social activities for the LGBTQ community, cultivated intimate relationships, and expressed that they felt more at ease about their sexual identities and practices compared to when they were still in Japan. Some even said that it was easier to be queer in Vietnam than in Japan, as sexual minorities in Vietnam have been given a greater voice,

and can express their own sexual orientations more freely. Being physically in Vietnam also means returned migrants do not have to negotiate the linguistic or cultural unfamiliarity, and therefore enjoy easier access to sexual opportunities. Phong, an IT engineer who spent seven years in Japan, shared that only by speaking in Vietnamese could he fully convey his affection to intimate partners. Furthermore, having dated several Japanese while living in Japan, Phong thought Japanese people were “too cold,” and he consequently put “more trust in Vietnamese people” when it came to intimacy. When asked about whether he wanted to migrate again, Phong replied without reluctance: “To be honest, I did not go to Japan because of my sexuality. But now I have come back to Vietnam, it is my sexuality that keeps me here. I feel comfortable living in Vietnam, and I do not want to move away—at least not in the near future.”

Moreover, overseas Vietnamese have a special status in Vietnam. In his works about money and marriageability, Thai (2014) describes how some low-income Vietnamese-American men, who were considered undesirable in the United States due to their racial and occupation status, were welcomed as good potential marriage partners in Vietnam. The shift in the way these men are seen is possible because the Vietnamese often perceive those living abroad as having greater financial power as a result of the economic gap between Vietnam and developed countries such as the US. Migrants, therefore, have access to symbolic, economic, and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1986, 1989) that could easily be appreciated in a Vietnamese materialistic society. In addition, return migrants sometimes hold foreign education credentials and, together with their experiences of living abroad, project an image of modernized and competent individuals who possess foreign linguistic skills and cultural knowledge. Consequently, they usually have higher chances in earning better wages compared to the average Vietnamese salary upon return. Possessing these different capitals influences migrants’ sexual expressions, desirabilities, and identities. The “major change” of Ben, a businessman in his mid-twenties, can clearly illustrate this point.

Ben only dated women before going to Japan and during the three years he lived in Tokyo. However, he started to date men, and just men, after returning to Vietnam. As we were chatting in a crowded Starbucks in the center of Ho Chi Minh City, Ben said that he had never thought of talking about his life as a gay man publicly. Indeed, his sexual practices and identity did not change until he returned, when a friend introduced him to a group of gay men in Ho Chi Minh City who also used to live in Japan. These people subsequently incorporated him into the city’s queer scene, and since then, Ben has fully embraced the gay lifestyle. Ben relayed that the gay identity “had always been there,” but he had not admitted it to avoid the childhood bullying of being an effeminate boy. When he returned to Vietnam and

started to earn a good salary with his Japan-related job, he considered himself to be better off than other people in his social network. The economic superiority thus offered him upward social mobility upon his return, which has improved his self-esteem and social respectability. As a result, Ben now feels more comfortable expressing his true self.

## **Discussion: A Sexual Field Approach to Return Queer Migration**

In order to make sense of how migrants' sexual desirabilities, identities, and practices are constructed in different stages of return migration, this chapter engages with the concept of "sexual field" (Green 2008, 2014, 2015). A sexual field "emerges when a subset of actors with potential romantic or sexual interests in one another congregate in physical or virtual space and orient themselves toward one another according to a logic of desirability imminent to their collective relations" (Green 2015: 27). The sexual field approach recognizes the power of field theory in explaining desire, desirability and sexual practices in contemporary sexual life. From the perspective of field theorists, a field is a relatively autonomous domain constructed with specific sets of rules by the participants, who struggle to claim recognition/rewards within it (Hilgers and Mangez 2015). Subsequently, within a sexual field, desire and desirability are products of ecological, social learning, and psychological processes that associate with the field itself. A key concept in the framework of sexual fields is "sexual capital," which refers to the ability to find intimate partners of one's choosing (Green 2014, 2015). As the sexual capital in a particular sexual field is the property of both field participants and the field itself, it could be seen as a fundamental factor that not only shapes but also allows individuals' positions in the field's structure of desire. Green's sexual field concept emerges from his studies of gay scenes in New York, and has been employed by scholars of queer and sexualities studies. This chapter engages with the concept by applying it to migration phenomena. Such an approach, I believe, allows a comprehensive understanding of migrants' negotiation of sexualities when they are positioned in different social contexts.

Despite the widely circulated images of an LGBT-friendly Japan, homophobic and heterosexist barriers still hinder sexual minorities in contemporary Japanese society from gaining full sexual expression and legal protections. Such barriers are even bigger for non-heterosexual migrants, who are confronted with racial and ethnic discrimination. The narratives of gay and lesbian Vietnamese returned migrants suggest that they are not favored in the Japanese queer sexual field. In other words, queer Vietnamese migrants do not possess a high position within a sexual field structured



by a Japanese hierarchy of desirability. Within this hierarchy, Vietnamese nationals are not seen as the desirable “type,” especially when compared with Japanese or white foreigners. In order to gain recognition in the field, queer Vietnamese migrants have to develop strategies that can help them win appreciation from other field participants, such as presenting the ability to communicate in English, cultivating Japanese language proficiency, or using suitable dating apps.

In contrast to their low position within the Japanese queer sexual fields, returned migrants occupy a relatively high position within contemporary Vietnamese queer sexual fields. This upward sexual mobility is a result of the process of capital conversion (Bourdieu 1986). In particular, upon their return from Japan, migrants are given higher social status thanks to the Vietnamese association of those who have lived abroad with greater economic resources, good education credentials, sophisticated mannerisms and modern worldviews. The financial and cultural capital they are thought to possess can be converted into symbolic capital, which in turn can then be converted into sexual capital, which allows these returned migrants to be considered as desirable within the structure of desire in Vietnamese queer sexual fields. While some might enjoy the changes in sexual experiences and desirability after coming back, a few participants concern about whether people in Vietnam approach them because of their sexual attractiveness or just because of their status as returned migrants.

From a mobility perspective, spatial mobility to and from Japan affects the social and sexual mobilities of queer Vietnamese migrants differently. Emigration from Vietnam to Japan might result in downward social mobility and sexual (im)mobility as migrants face discrimination based on not only their sexuality but also their ethnicity and nationality. On the other hand, returning from Japan to Vietnam offers queer migrants a chance to elevate their social and sexual statuses in the home society thanks to the conversion between different forms of capital. Consequently, in return migration, spatial mobility might lead to upward social and sexual mobility. This chapter’s engagement with the sexual field concept from a migratory and mobility perspective therefore not only expands the meanings of migration and mobility but also sheds light on the systems of social meanings, institutions, and practices that shape queer migrants’ experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Transnational migration in the contemporary world is mainly a response to economic and/or demographic pushes and pulls, but it is also a process

contingent on tangling factors. By exploring the return migration of queer Vietnamese from Japan, this chapter has shown that sexualities are influential in every phase of transnational relocation, and that their journeys diverge from the reductive assumption about the migration motivation as being committed to material betterment. The chapter, therefore, responds to the growing need to reflect on the tangled conundrums of mobilities and sexualities, and how these notions are conditioned by sociocultural structures and individuals' agencies (Howe, Zaraysky, and Lorentzen 2008; Groes and Fernandez 2018). It argues that the sexualities of queer migrants should be seen as susceptible to intersecting and tangled influences of diverse factors, ranging from an institutional level, such as employment and education markets, and dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality, to an individual level, such as sexual and gender identities, race and ethnicity, social class, and possessed capital.

In addition, the chapter's focus on returned queer migrants challenges the commonly assumed unidirectionality of cross-national queer migration, and provides more nuanced perspectives to the studies of sexualities in migration. The return migration of queer migrants who had initially wanted to "escape" from Vietnam but in the end found more sexual freedom in the home country subverts the designation of receiving and sending societies as respectively sexually liberal and sexually oppressive places. The chapter therefore puts into question whether Japan is truly liberal, and Vietnam immensely oppressive, for sexual minorities. It also suggests the necessity to understand queer migration as entailing tangled mobilities through the lenses of intersectionality, mobility, and transnationalism, because migrants negotiate their mobility trajectories in accordance with not only changing social contexts at both ends of the migration channel, but also the kinds of mobility available in different phases of their lives.

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## NOTES

1. The term LGBTQ stands for the group of people who identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer.
2. By the end of 2019, the number of Vietnamese nationals residing in Japan was 411,968. The biggest foreign population in Japan was Chinese (813,675), followed by Korean (446,364) (Ministry of Justice 2020).
3. The Social Evil Campaign in the 1990s and early 2000s was considered to be an effort to reinforce a Vietnamese tradition and social morality by the Communist Party. This campaign focused on the curtailing of acts that are considered to cause social harms such as drug using, gambling, engaging in prostitution and homosexual sex, etc.
4. There have been quite a few television reality shows in Vietnam that featured participants who identified as members of the LGBTQ community, such as *Nguoi Ay La Ai* [Who Is That], The Voice Vietnam, and Vietnam Idol. These shows have all received positive feedback from audiences and possessed high viewing rates.
5. Extract from interview with Phong, a 29-year-old IT engineer in Hanoi, 17 September 2018.
6. The term “fish” could be used as a slang term in Vietnam for a possible intimate partner.

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