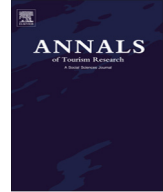




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Cu Chi tunnels: Vietnamese transmigrant's perspective



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ABSTRACT

Made famous during the Vietnam War as underground passages of the Viet Cong guerillas, the Cu Chi Tunnels historical site is a tourist attraction, commonly associated with a kind of low-brow entertainment aimed at foreign visitors. This article expands the scholarship of this site using auto-ethnographic and qualitative survey research methods. Aimed at agitating Cu Chi's kitsch and political associations, the author considers the Vietnamese market economy and the reversed-migration flows, in order to contextualize Cu Chi as an identity-negotiation nexus for transmigrant Vietnamese professionals. Particular focus is placed on how visitation to Cu Chi tunnels and the abstention of visitation can allude to the participant's heritage affiliations.

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Introduction

I have never been very good with words. They do not come easily and rarely fully articulate my thoughts. If I were play dough, words would be those seemingly innocuous extruders, forcing me into a pre-designed tube, squeezing until I emerge on the other side as a handful of neat multi-colored spaghetti strands. At age nine, I had a short-lived breakthrough and composed a poem about the moment after a rainstorm: the fog is lifting as a majestic figure emerges. Unfortunately, the poem was not an assignment so there was no reason for it to see the light of day. Three years later, a opportunity came. His name is Giang, a sweet boy who remains one of my oldest friends. I do not recall how the occasion came about but I remember an immense sense pride after that very grand dictation:

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"So, what do you think?"

"... Don't tell anyone else about this poem."

"Why not?"

"... because we don't like Ho Chi Minh in America."

This is one of many encounters where I felt out of place within the Vietnamese American community. Other notable moments include being eliminated in the 1999 local Tet Pageant for answering the judges' questions in English, and shunned by the University of Florida's Vietnamese Student Association for raising issues with the Republic flag. Everywhere I turned, there was another extractor, another social political discourse that categorized and gauged my Vietnamese-ness. By 2006, I had had enough. I threw a tennis racket, along with my ball of play dough baggage, into a suitcase and set off for Ho Chi Minh City. What was supposed to be a nine-month research project mushroomed into two-year sabbatical, during which I shamelessly consumed my way into the City's social cosmos: coffee with Vietnamese journalists, beer with what's left of my childhood group of friends, beach excursion with ex-pat English teachers, and grilled squid with a random 65-year old neighbor. It is fair to say, I spent my weight in Vietnamese Dong discovering the crevices of the City and its environs. Everywhere, except Cu Chi Tunnels. I did not give the tunnels a second thought until I was sitting in the brightly lit office of a colleague:

"Why not expand on the last paper, elaborate on the visual production side of the diaspora? Talk about all the expat artists you worked with?"

"None of them truly engages with community... Anyway, I don't understand what's wrong with researching the Cu Chi Tunnels?"

"It's well covered, flat. Nobody takes it seriously. You, yourself, boycotted going there."

Being American, I was instantly defensive. Fortunately, I soon overcame my vexation: Was not visiting a commercial and political statement? Feeling restless, I procrastinated by chatting with my younger sister, a 24 year-old pharmacy student living in Florida:

"So, a random question: what do you think about Cu Chi Tunnels?"

"Cuchi? Like female genitalia?"

"No! It's the underground tunnels that the Viet Cong used during the War."

"How am I supposed to know that?"

Though unorthodox, the preceding illustrates the ambiguity concerning the Cu Chi tunnels; of note are the circumstantial nature of knowledge about the site, and the diversification of perspectives among members of the contemporary overseas Vietnamese communities. As such, these conditions provide an opportunity to re-visit and re-imagine all that is considered to be *true* about the historical site. In the following, two ideological strands are presented and weaved together in order to make the case for further exploration of the significance of the Cu Chi Tunnels. The first deals with conventional understanding of the tunnels. Perceived as a 'touring' for international visitors in transit rather than a 'destination' attraction. The investigations of Cu Chi have previously plateaued with political (Mangold & Pencyate, 1985) and "dark" (Lennon & Foley, 1996) touristic explorations (Alneng, 2002; Schwenkel, 2006).

The second ideological strand has to do with the relationship between the Vietnamese diaspora and the Vietnamese homeland. Generally considered as anti-Communist, members of the diaspora are not expected to develop cultural affiliations with political sensitive sites. However, recent flows of overseas Vietnamese professionals relocating to Ho Chi Minh, new imaginings are arising that alter previous assumptions about ways of both knowing the Cu Chi Tunnels and the Vietnamese diaspora. This paper uses a multi-disciplinary approach to present qualitative survey of second generation Vietnamese Americans, where identity processes are analyzed to determine the extent to which living in the homeland facilitates transnational sensibilities.

What's a Cu Chi?

Located 30 kilometers northwest of Ho Chi Minh City, the small semi-rural Cu Chi District is known for its extensive network of underground passageways used by the Viet Cong communist guerrillas.

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