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EVALUATIONS OF 'OPPORTUNITY' VERSUS 'RISK'

Vietnamese migrants' experiences and perceptions of the UK border

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Introduction

In the context of migration, borders and bordering refer to not only external territorial borders but also 'the everyday construction of borders through ideology, cultural mediation, discourses, political institutions, attitudes and everyday forms of transnationalism' (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). Borderscapes, a term used to describe geopolitical connections (Brambilla, 2015), has been introduced to overcome more static approaches to borders, which are unidimensional or only focus on isolated aspects of bordering. An emphasis on borderscapes enables both the practices and imaginaries of bordering to be taken into account, which in turn provides better understanding of how these processes are mutually constitutive. The concept of borderscapes is useful when studying migrant communities in the UK and particularly those crossing borders through informal routes. Vietnamese migrants to the UK have been starkly subject to the hostile UK borderscapes. The death of 39 Vietnamese nationals found suffocated in a refrigerated lorry container on the 23 October 2019 reignited public debates around human trafficking, labour exploitation, and illegal migration and UK border deaths. News coverage following these deaths was representative of the continuing and more recent border debates which focus almost exclusively on criminalisation of the migrants as well as the traffickers and criminal networks while overlooking the role of global supply chains, the discrepancies between neoliberal-driven labour market demands, and legal entry routes into the immigration system for 'low skilled' non-EU migrants. However, despite knowledge of the likelihood of exploitation and being in precarious situations, Vietnamese migrants seem undeterred to come to the UK (Gavard, 2020). Evidence suggests that

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Vietnamese migrants are knowingly engaging in risk-taking behaviours and are even complicit in their own exploitation through crossing UK borders (Lainez, 2019). By applying a borderscapes approach, such practices can be put into relief with the broader discourses and social constructions of borders which may simultaneously reinforce them and make them appear more porous.

By exploring both the experiences and the perceptions of Vietnamese border crossings to the UK, this chapter aims to elucidate the role of border controls and perceptions that lead to the persistence of dangerous border crossings. In particular, it will explore how Vietnamese migrants evaluate risk and opportunity in UK border crossings reflecting on their experience and perceptions before, during, and after crossing the border. In so doing, we explore conceptions of 'luck' and 'bravery' in migrants' narratives of migration as individualised sense-making strategies and a form of risk management. We suggest that the seemingly individualised narratives of risk in Vietnamese migrants' imaginaries of the UK border are in fact located in wider collective and political processes in Vietnam which emerge from the specific conditions of the state-driven market-socialist economy. After reviewing the literature on risk and opportunity in migration decisions, this chapter describes the study's methodology before going on to analyse the narratives emerging from in-depth qualitative interviews with Vietnamese migrants. We conclude by arguing that practices of border policies, border guards, and migrant networks work together with the imaginaries of Vietnamese migrants to sustain the ongoing precarious borderscapes.

'Risk' and uncertainty in migration decisions

Perceptions of opportunities and risks among migrants have been an important area for migration research (Bayerl et al., 2021). This has been documented in research on refugees (UNHCR, 2017), undocumented migrants, and economic migrants (Hagen-Zanker & Mallet, 2020). In this research, we explore the extent to which perceptions of risk and opportunity shift over the course of migration and encounters with the border. While risk and uncertainty are arguably features of everyday life (Beck, 1992), they are particularly pervasive to all forms of migration (O'Connell, 2002). The degree and scale of risk may vary according to the form of migration – refugees, asylum seekers, regular or irregular migration, with a particular intensity for irregular migration (Williams & Baláž, 2012). Risk and uncertainty can feature across all the stages of the migration cycle including pre-departure arrangements, the journey itself, crossing borders, the settlement process (housing, employment and legal arrangements), as well as future return and reintegration (Williams & Baláž, 2012). Different scales of risk in migration range from the individual level to household and community levels (Stark &

Bloom, 1985; Stark, 1991; Mehta, 2007). Notions of 'risk aversion' and 'risk tolerance' have been another way of making sense of who migrates and who stays (Huber & Nowotny, 2020). Research has shown that some social groups are more likely than others to take risks – for example, men are more willing than women to take risks (Hartog et al., 2000; Jaeger et al., 2007); the young are more likely to take risks than older people (Donkers et al., 1999; Dohmen et al., 2005). Willingness to take risks also varies across countries according to the specific features of economic and social systems. For example, migrants from countries with weaker welfare systems are more likely to migrate to countries with a stronger welfare system as a strategy of unemployment risk reduction (Heitmueller, 2005). However, criticisms of this approach have highlighted the need to understand more deeply how logics of risk at the destination country may limit the migration of 'risk takers' (Zinn, 2017).

Approaches emphasising the role of socio-cultural identity and embeddedness of risk and risk-taking offer a more useful way of taking a more contextualised understanding of evaluations of risk in the migration decisions. As noted by Zinn and Taylor Goodby (2006), 'the individual's perception and response to risk can only be understood against the background of their embeddedness in a socio-cultural background and identity as a member of a social group, rather than through individual cognition' (p.37). The scale of risk, the conceptualisation of risk as either socially constructed or as an objective fact, and the distinctions made between being 'informed by risk' versus 'being at risk' are all factors at play (Douglas & Wildavasky, 1982; Boholm, 2003; Zinn & Taylor-Gooby, 2006; Williams & Baláž, 2012). The development of a 'typology of risk rationalities' (Douglas, 1992) has been informative for unpicking motivations behind various migrations, while the use of ideal types has been criticised for oversimplifying the complexities of risk and culture, leading to calls for a more multilayered approach to risk (Zinn & Taylor-Gooby, 2006). Using these different factors as loose indicators to help understand the conditions and motivations of different groups of migrants may serve as a more useful approach. For example, undocumented migrants may have strong social cohesion and low freedom of movement; hence, people from the same areas migrate to the same regions in the UK and do similar jobs, and their behaviour may fall under a number of risk rationalities distinguished by Douglas (1992) such as fatalism, hierarchy, individualism, and egalitarianism. However, due to the different phases of the migratory journey (deciding to migrate, deciding to stay in the host country or deciding to return to Vietnam), these motivations are not static, and they can change over time and over the course of the migration process. For example, fatalism and aspects of individualism may develop over the course of a difficult migration journey (as we will illustrate below), while egalitarianism remains a constant rationality.

Linked to the notion of risk is that of uncertainty, a concept that has been explored in relation to migration decisions and sacrifices and has distinctively been linked to the issue of time and temporality (Hoang, 2020). The concepts of risk and uncertainty can be distinguished according to whether an uncertainty is 'known', and thus, a risk can be taken, or whether the uncertainty is not known, in which case it remains an uncertainty. Risk has been more broadly equated with known probabilities of outcomes (Zinn, 2017). According to Williams and Baláž (2012), this has tended to be characterised by an economic perspective on the notion of 'betting on a roulette wheel' (Williams & Baláž, 2012), where individual investment or gambling decisions can be based upon probability and various known outcomes. Thus, while risk can be understood as 'a conscious calculation that is made at certain points of a migration decision', uncertainty may be characterised as a constant state, one which occurs across all stages of the migration journey. Risk and the notions of gambling and betting nevertheless relate to distinctive cultural meaning schemas in Vietnam which reinforce illusion of control beliefs (Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka 2010) and thus emphasise notions of agency and culture rather than fatalism or being subject to the whim of chance.

The process of individualisation is developed in migration studies by the concept of edgework which focuses on the development of personal competences in managing risk and uncertainty as individuals 'manage risk in order to reduce the likelihood of hazardous outcomes' (Lyng 2008, p.190). While edgework is normally applied to more positive evaluations of risk undertaken by privileged migrants (such as students or tourist migration), the opportunity to develop skills by managing these risks may also be experienced by wider migrant categories, such as the Vietnamese who are seeking to 'overcome the odds'. However, rather than simply remaining personal capabilities, their edgework serves not just individual competences but also broader social and political migration agendas which are collectively derived and reproduced. In this chapter, we use a notion of risk which emphasises the socio-cultural (and political) embeddedness of migration decisions that explain how such high levels of risk are rationalised by individuals. We argue that risk management is enacted through the notion of individual capabilities that equip migrants with a sense of control and agency when navigating hostile borderscapes.

Opportunity and aspiration in Vietnam

The notion of opportunity can be understood under a broader development perspective as being shaped by dynamics of economic, social, and political freedom. Sen (1999) has argued that freedom should be the goal of development at both individual and collective levels and should eliminate forces restricting freedom (political systems or repression) and increase access to

economic opportunities and public services. To understand how notions of opportunity may be framed and interpreted by migrants from the global south migrating to the global north, the notion of the ‘politics of aspiration’ (Finnemore & Jurkovich, 2020) has been drawn upon as playing a distinctive role in migration imaginaries (De Haas, 2021). Wilcox et al. (2021) have argued that across Southeast Asia (China, Laos, and Vietnam), a ‘politics of aspiration’ has emerged through combination of market-driven economies with state socialist values. They argue that the production of distinctive contradictions between the pressures of capitalism (to consume) and struggles of late socialism (modernisation and the harmonisation of individual and collective desires) leads subjects to balance new desires and hopes in a context where their ability to realise them can be questionable. Drawing upon Berlant’s (2001) ‘cruel optimism’, they argue that the motivational aspirations held up by the successful few (of how life could be if one worked hard enough) ‘has the potential for cruelty and negative consequences for the aspiration holders when and if they are not fulfilled’ (Wilcox et al., 2021, p.17). However, while the Vietnamese migrants might find the opportunity for meaning-making and value-creation in this new era, they do not have the state support or infrastructure to help them realise their aspirations.

As noted earlier, when migrants have to navigate both social and economic hierarchies across borders, their imaginations of borders not only represent their individual aspirations but also the political and social imperatives of the homeland which all at once come into conflict with policies and practices such as thwarted attempts at crossing the border. The physical risks of crossing the channel, knowledge of the law and their rights, and treatment by internal border enforcers (around age believability, story believability, asylum process, inability to work as undocumented and asylum seekers) are all part of the borderscapes they must negotiate. While aspirations for a better life appear to be individual and private matters, they are arguably linked into broader systems of governance and meaning that drive a ‘will to improve’ (Sen, 1999). Individual migrants (who find this newly created space for meaning-making and value-creation) find themselves realising these aspirations on their own, which has led to successful border crossings as well as numerous border fatalities.

Methodology

Building on from the theoretical frameworks set out above, this chapter investigates evaluations of risk and opportunity of crossing the UK border by analysing in-depth interviews with Vietnamese migrants in the UK and Vietnam and community leaders in Vietnam. It draws from a broader project exploring the relationship between urbanisation patterns in Vietnam and migration to the UK in three key sending regions of Vietnam: Hai Phong,

Nghe An, and Ha Tinh.[1] Interviews were conducted with 28 migrants: 12 in the UK and 16 in Vietnam (12 of whom had returned from the UK; 4 were considering going to the UK). The majority of our migrant participants were men (n = 20) and a smaller number were women (n = 8). This reflects the estimated gender composition of recent Vietnamese migrants of which men represent between 70% and 80% (Hynes et al., 2019). Age at the time of migration ranged between 24 and 38. Interviews were conducted in English or Vietnamese, and sometimes a combination, and translated into English.[2] Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated for analysis. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, and a small minority were conducted online, due to COVID social distancing restrictions. Given the sensitivities of many of the participants, care was taken to ensure full compliance with ethical procedures. All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms. Ethics were approved by the Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee (UREC).

Notions of 'luck' and 'bravery' in individual assessments of risk

In our research with migrants, experts, and community members in Vietnam and the UK, we found a common shared perception about the risks of crossing the UK border, and these were put into context in light of the relative opportunities in Vietnam and potential gains in the UK. This was highlighted by the following expert interviewees in the local communes in Nghe An:

> In [our commune] we had people die during that [Essex lorry] incident. I also know some people over there. So, I know the general public opinion [is] that if they are unlucky, they can't do anything about it instead of accepting it. But, because there were 39 people, it was too many. Usually, migrating has a lot of risks here such as recently, there was a case of 13 people that crossed the sea, but their ship was sunken, and they died. So people here think that when they decide to go, they accept the risks.
>
> *(Local commune policeman, Nghe An, May 2022)*

While the ideas expressed here that the risks at stake are high, including death and losing money, they are highlighted as risks that people are prepared to take when they decide to migrate. These views are also put into contrast by the UK not being a 'simple route' like other countries where official labour-exchange programmes are in place. Instead, the routes to the UK are 'word of mouth' and not officially announced and not legally sanctioned.

In terms of the risks described above, individual migrants who have made the journey to the UK explain how they rationalised their personal risks of crossing the UK borders. Notions of 'luck' and 'bravery' are featured as sense-making narratives to describe perceptions of the risks. By drawing

upon notions of bravery and luck, participants could be seen as inhabiting these as a personal characteristic ('I am a lucky person' or 'luck is on my side') which may be used to help lessen the perceived odds of danger during the journey. Furthermore, transforming structural constraints and other uncertainties (which are out of their own control) into more individualised traits may enable migrants to feel more in control and position themselves as having greater agency. Formulations of risk and luck were made in the following ways:

> To be honest, there were risks, but it was all about luck … I knew [how it was on the way]. There were people who had gone by this way. I knew that it was difficult. I prepared my mentality.
>
> *(Ha Tinh Returnee 1, male, 45 years)*

This participant felt reassured because even though he knew the migratory journey would be risky, because other people had done it and 'made it', he felt it was more 'doable'. This is an example of 'informed/calculated risks' based on knowledge of the success of people who migrated before him. The conditions of risk and uncertainty which can be confronted by a form of bravery (being 'bold') and also even 'reckless' are relevant in the extract below:

> I'm a fast guy. I also have a college degree, but I was determined to go because why, I was born in a family with many brothers and sisters, my parents are also old… I'm the youngest, so I have the thought that I have to break through, go, but stay at home and make a salary of 4–5 million, when will I have a car? when I can have a house, get married? So it's [down to] me, risk yourself … I also researched, of course, my brothers and friends on the other side, they also painted me a rosy picture, they did not mention the difficulty, so as the saying goes 'I closed my eyes and raised my feet'. So its just like you spend your money, be bold, and also reckless.
>
> *(Returnee 2, AH, male, age 30, Nghe An)*

Here the notion of individual sacrifice for the collective (family) good provides a strong moral rationale for taking these risks, while a focus on individual competences, past success, strength and boldness of character enables a mitigation of risk. A common theme of having to take an individual risk for the wider family links the notion of individualisation to collectivism. Risk can be understood as both a strategy of breadwinning and also a family duty. Similarly, in both quotes, knowledge of acquaintances who have successfully made the trip factors into their calculations on risk-taking. While mixed into these narratives are narratives of consumption and the underlying need to seek the 'good life' as seen by the drive to accumulate material (car and house) and to form a family.

Risking uncertainty for a more certain future?

Notions of uncertainty in the sending country featured strongly across the data. This kind of uncertainty was often positioned within the context of desperation and unsustainable livelihoods rather than in line with the 'try your luck' approach where staying home was a viable option. Here, the certainty was that staying in Vietnam would lead to impending 'social death':[3]

> Before going, I was an ordinary worker. I worked in agriculture, producing agricultural products …. I had to try. When I was at home, I didn't know what I could do, could I have this kind of income. They couldn't tell me 100% sure that I would earn that amount of money, or after a certain time I would have enough money for my ticket, then how many years would it take to save that much of money. Nobody knew for sure, so I accepted that 50/50 probability. […] Because I determined from home that I was 100% sure it would be difficult, going there would help me have a more stable life when I returned home.
>
> *(Returnee 2,Male, 45 years, Ha Tinh)*

This issue of taking a 50/50% chance risk with their lives is in line with the 'roulette wheel' style of probability risk (William & Baláž 2012). This type of risk calculation was a recurrent theme in our data, particularly in relation to risk evaluations made before migration. These calculations provide subjects with a sense of agency that they are taking action to control hazards in the future (Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2010). As Hayenhjelm (2006) has noted in other in relation to African migrants in socio-economically vulnerable contexts, 'refraining from taking any action is also a kind of risk taking' (p.194), thus pointing to an element of agency in risk-taking decisions. This can be observed beyond the narratives of migrants who rationalise why they will be in the lucky 50% when crossing the UK border through more active notions of personal competence and edgework seen below:

> I see everything as normal. Even if I go to England, I just go out normally, I don't know the way to ask the West, ask and buy a train ticket, I'll just go, I don't have any problem with cultural obstacles.(..). I have the experience of going out, so I'm brave...[Vietnamese] people are stubborn, daring, daring, just walking like that, just hearing that they're walking but don't know what to do, I just close my eyes and move my feet, must also step on walking, must step, that's all… And if you are unlucky, you can still go to an immigration camp or go to jail, because staying at home is also difficult.
>
> *(Nghe An Returnee 2, AH, male, age 30)*

The function of previous migration experiences can be seen to impact on migrants' perceptions of overcoming the odds when migrating to the UK.

Having already been a labour migrant in South Korea, this participant draws on the notion of 'bravery' as a personal competence which enables him to overcome cultural obstacles and understanding new systems. The idea of cultural competence, bound up in the notion of edgework, plays into the role of migratory careers where Vietnamese migrants often migrate multiple times to Asia or Europe before coming to the UK (Lainez, 2019). The idea that Vietnamese people are 'stubborn' and 'brave' as an inherent cultural quality also plays into this performance of edgework.

More broadly, the notion that even death would not deter them (although no other alternatives are worse than death are discussed) represents a distinctively high-risk migration strategy. Their use of the Vietnamese proverb 'just close my eyes and move my feet' suggests something beyond taking a calculated risk (or exercising their agency), implying surrender to fate/uncertainty, which also feeds into the notion of being reckless (different to bravery). These migrants are aware of the risks involved, but they made an informed decision to migrate. Similar observations have been made in relation to the sub-Saharan African migrants. Adepoju (2011) illustrates how culturally specific attitudes to risk more generally can make high-risk migration (involving death) more easily acceptable in the minds of undocumented migrants. But as de Haas (2007) has pointed out, migrants may move not because of absolute poverty, but rather 'because of a general lack of perspectives for self-realization in their origin countries and the concomitant inability to meet their personal aspirations' (p.22), which we argue are linked to the politics of aspiration in Vietnam.

Risks and vulnerabilities at the border

Risks and increased vulnerabilities at the border were outlined by participants as relating to the crossing from France to the UK. These were often described in much more matter-of-fact ways, reflecting the difficulty and discomfort in recounting the experiences participants dwelt on them less. Migrants discussed a range of risks involved that took the forms of physical, financial, social and cultural vulnerability, and uncertainty. First, the uncertainty of waiting in Calais for the opportunity to cross the border to the UK by a container truck. This period of waiting in France was described as 'difficult' due to being homeless and living illegally in groups in the forest. Other forms of vulnerability related to the need to give up their personal documents (such as passport, identity documents) by destroying them or sending to their relatives to take back to Vietnam. Being reliant on the 'guides' was often perceived as one of the most difficult stages of the journey:

> To be honest, at that time in the jungle, I didn't know where you went through, just followed the guide because I didn't know the language.
>
> *(Returnee 3, male, 43 years, Ha Tinh)*

> They [guides] won't let you take the money … before leaving, he will give each guy a bag of dry food. Wherever he goes, ask the people there, he says he's self-advocating.
>
> *(Returnee 1, male, Nghe An)*

Finding the way to cross the UK border was described as the most risky part, as hiding in a lorry container entailed many risks such as having to cover their heads with nylon bags to avoid detection by sniffer dogs, the fear of being detected by British police, arrested, and deported to Vietnam. Further risks involved having to change to different lorry containers four to five times during the crossing. Participants described the financial risks of border crossings with some having attempted the journey between three and five times (Nghe An returnee 2), each time losing the cost of their 'trip' (between £3000 and £5000 each time) and having to start again. Issue of cost was flagged up as well as getting 'lost'. Reflecting upon this part of the journey, one migrant says:

> If you don't go, you will stay with someone, if you go slow, you will get lost, if you get lost, you will die in the middle of the forest, it [convoy] won't wait for anyone. It's been too long, it's a container truck, it takes 30 minutes to go from here to there, it will turn on for 30 minutes, then it will drop in 30 minutes, if you get lost, you will die.
>
> *(Nghe AN Returnee 1, male, deported)*

Here, the issue of getting lost features both in the journey across land (in the forest) and also in the container lorry. The expression of 'being lost' links again closely to the risk of death, the precarity of the journey, and the need to survive it.

> Because the driver got lost, afraid of the police […]. And I'm crammed with all the fruit around my body, there's only one hole to breathe. Fruits are piled up around the body, each square is straight, breathing through the nose only, it's not comfortable… the 39 dead people were better off.
>
> *(Nghe An, Returnee 1, male, deported)*

This is also seen in other participants' narratives. The notion of risk and opportunity is linked to the neoliberal politics of aspiration, in which in this case the participant indicates the freedom of opportunity to aspire to a better life is a potent drive, as participants discussed that they are 'happy they had the chance'. The comment that the '39 dead people are better off' refers to the fact that although dead in the end, their journey prior to that was relatively comfortable (having gone through the 'VIP' route which included only the migrants in the container, without fruits or goods). During the migration process/crossing of borders, perceptions may shift as danger approaches.

Danger was interpreted as coming in many forms including threat of the loss of money and livelihoods.

> That tourist ticket costs more than 400 million [VND], so I fight, I say what to do to get home to make 400 million but I will become a failure. When you leave, there are many expectations, things to do, thinking that you will earn a lot of money later on developing this life and that, but now coming back is a failure, a failure to your wife and children, yourself. When I looked at myself objectively, I didn't dare to go back, I didn't dare to return, so I shook my head again, babbling that there is no money, don't come back to Vietnam. Instead, I'll go back to the immigration camp.
>
> *(Nghe An Returnee 2, male, age 30)*

Torn between trying to resist deportation for financial reasons versus being sent back to a detention centre, this participant weighs up the financial dilemmas of how he would return back to Europe after having lost the money invested in the trip against his more emotional desires to be deported so that he could return home to his pregnant wife and avoid spending more time in a French immigration camp. Such dilemmas indicate the vulnerability faced by those who took the risks to migrate, who have undergone the difficult journey, and cannot return because of the debts at home. This situation renders migrants even more vulnerable and might drive them to take further risks in order to avoid returning home with a 'failed migration' story. This process contributes to a negative feedback loop of risk and loss.

Accepting responsibility

An important aspect of risk-taking in the narratives related to the responsibilisation of individuals in the migration process is often referred to as 'accepting the trade offs'. The perils of the UK border regime were often accepted as 'a given' with migrants perceiving of themselves and their compatriots as active agents prepared to accept the trade-offs with their decision rather than as victims of borders:

> In Vietnam, people are still very happy when they put themselves in difficult and unfortunate situations. Like the case of 39 people dying on that container, not all of them have come here to flee, [seeking] political asylum. But there are people who accept to spend money, like those articles published, there are families who accept to borrow, sell land, pledge to let their children move here. Hoping for a better life, like people accept trade-offs. One's life could be better in this country. And in the end, there were people who had to accept to exchange their lives, lost completely, lost money, lost their whole lives, people accepted the trade-off.
>
> *(Vietnamese migrant, UK, GL2 Male, 38)*

However, such narratives must be couched within their specific context within UK borderscapes. We can argue that without documents, and without a permitted legal route, this is the only way they could migrate. Choice, in this sense, may be a fallacy as in practice, undocumented migrants are *forced* to use their agency to navigate their migratory journey. This sense of powerlessness and of being at the mercy of the system might be contrasted with the previous forms of agency explored above, where participants are able to cope with distinct forms of risk and uncertainty such as navigating new cultural systems (by use of previous migration experience, skills, and education) and being able to bear the hardship of the journey by being brave and accepting their fate by 'closing their eyes and keep walking'.

Conclusion

By using the lens of borderscapes to explore the dynamics at play in the construction of UK borders, we have identified a key site of contestation where border crossing practices interact with migrant imaginaries. Specifically, the UK border regime creates the risks experienced above, and these are underpinned by the imaginary of 'deterrence'. However, the borderscape becomes a site of subversion as migrants enact bravery and responsibility rather than being deterred. Migrants' origin cultures and political landscapes collide with UK policyscapes to provide a treacherous frontier, where migrants themselves must navigate, negotiate, and make sense of migration hazards and risks through culturally specific risk-management strategies. Far from being passive sites of submission, these borders represent active landscapes of subversion and contestation. Semantic and symbolic aspects of the border are redefined through Vietnamese encounters with the UK borders as they narratively change their meanings and value-structures through reinterpreting the impact of national policies upon individual subjects. Their imaginaries thus play a powerful role in subverting different levels of bordering for Vietnamese migrants. Borderwork in this respect operates at the conjunction of conflicting politics of aspiration in Vietnam with the practical realities of the UK border, both of which are layered by imperatives of the Vietnamese state which have become internalised as an individualised desire and practice. The distinctive combination of socialist-led development and neoliberalisation encourages citizens to seek the 'good life' as part of practising good citizenship. Furthermore, the individualisation of processes of risk are a stark reminder of how multiple states' policies become embodied by individuals and render migrants more precarious. By internalising the Vietnamese national policies and narratives which encourage citizens to strive for the 'good life' under the politics of aspiration, individual migrants take it upon themselves to strive for 'success' going against the odds and without the support of established migration support such as those under labour-exchange contracts

with other countries. Crossing the UK border offers much greater opportunity but also the risk of death, which are both framed as quests of bravery and luck. Adopting individualised narratives of risk-taking, luck and bravery (as personal capabilities) offers migrants a way to perform civic duty, fulfil familial responsibilities and claims to personal success. In our research, we see a mixed picture in terms of experiences, backgrounds, and perceptions when encountering these.

A common theme is the need to take risks and those risks are rationalised in terms of individual capabilities to overcome the odd strength of personal character, luck and bravery, and also to risk one's own life for the benefit of other family members. Evaluations of migration risk are counterbalanced by the risks of staying in Vietnam, where suffering (both social and economic) can be deemed worse. The notion expressed by some participants that Vietnamese people are happy when they put themselves in difficult and unfortunate circumstances (due to the potential opportunity to succeed) is an indication of how deeply this social narrative runs. Undocumented migration to the UK represents one of the few opportunities for migrants coming from poorer rural areas in Vietnam – it represents a near impossible feat which necessitates a high risk with (possible) high-gain decisions.

Notes

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3 A common phrase used by Vietnamese migrants and also reflected in the literature (see also Williams, 2015).

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