

**The Struggle to Belong**  
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**Local Responses to Migrant Activities in Berlin**

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## **Abstract**

The paper deals with the subject of former Vietnamese contract workers in Berlin. Nowadays, this group operates in various businesses, like modern authentic Vietnamese restaurants, nail shops or wholesale centres. Using their resources, e. g. social networks, Vietnamese migrants apply several strategies to adapt to the German labour market. The paper discusses these strategies in the framework of mixed-embeddedness, network- and social capital theory in a transnational perspective. How do Vietnamese entrepreneurs react on the demands of certain neighbourhoods and how do they make use of urban spaces? Where, when and under what conditions do they compete with German entrepreneurs?

The paper reveals responses of transnationalism in a local setting, shown by two examples.

Firstly, Berlin's communal politicians tried to establish a Chinatown either on an East-Berlin industrial wasteland or in a suburban commune. The – self-evident but unconsidered – lack of a common identity of Asian migrants in Berlin, the inadequate local embedding, as well as the top-down approach contradicted the grown structures of the multi-layered 'Vietnamese community' in Berlin. Hence, this project was never realised. Using the example of the Dong Xuan Centre in Berlin, it will be demonstrated how a "Vietnamtown" grew on a former marginal site in a bottom-up process. Currently, it receives growing attention by local authorities, a culturally mixed clientele, tourists, scientists and artists. The semi-formal or informal business of the 1990ies became increasingly formalised in response to heightened control by local authorities, e. g. by the collection office. It will be shown how Vietnamese migrants find themselves in an ongoing negotiation process with German laws and provisions and the majority society. This example reveals considerable, that 'transnationalism from below' is not easy to regulate. It demonstrates which different interests converge in the local receiving context.

Secondly, I will present local actors' divergences on promoting transnationalism. On the one side, migrant self-organisations (MSO) connected to the Vietnamese embassy in Berlin supports transnationalism, e. g. by offering Vietnamese language classes to Vietnamese pupils. This can be explained by Vietnam's interests in increasing monetary remittances and foreign direct investments, and in sustaining the overseas migrants' ties to Vietnam. On the other side, "oppositional" MSO's support Vietnamese migrants during the incorporation into the German society and the German first and regulated labour market and offer German language classes to first-generation or newly arrived Vietnamese.

These local conflicts and divergences will be shown on the basis of expert and entrepreneur interviews, which were held in Berlin and Hanoi as part of a multi-sited research project. It will be discussed, whether transnationality can be used as a resource and in how far it is a matter of perspective, of interests and how it differs within the group of Vietnamese migrants in Berlin.