Refereed article

Combining Research Practices: Can Foreign Researchers Create a Synthesis of Scientific Systems?

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Summary
Why should Germans conduct research in Vietnam if there are Vietnamese researchers who could do this work? This is the question that this article tries to answer. By presenting two different research projects that were implemented in Vietnam by German researchers, the special role that what we call the "transcultural researcher" holds will be analyzed. As a theoretical framework, the work of Rehbein (2013) on the "kaleidoskopische Dialektik" and Homi K. Bhabha's (2004) "third space" will be employed. We argue that the researcher can create a synthesis of two societies and two scientific systems as he or she temporarily migrates to the country in which the research is implemented. The synthesis in this context is, however, not accompanied by the loss of either of those two but rather entails the deeper connection of both.

Keywords: *Kaleidoskopische Dialektik*, third space, Forschung, Global South, Vietnam

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with the role of foreign researchers in knowledge production in and about Vietnam. A question that sometimes arises when we, two female German researchers, present our research about Vietnam to Vietnamese researchers is why we as Germans do social science research in and about Vietnam, and if this is not a task better fulfilled by Vietnamese themselves. This question usually is unrelated to the content of the research, but is based on the notion that being native to a country, and thus having knowledge of local customs, networks, and — primarily — fluency in the local language, would hold profound advantages. This stresses the need for German researchers conducting research on a foreign country to question their own work in a fundamental way: What makes them the right researchers for this job?

We argue that due to their position as relative outsiders, these foreign researchers can introduce a change of perspectives and practices — and explore different meanings within research objects. We are referring to this type of research as "transcultural." In reference to Hendrich et al. (2017), the use of the word "trans" here aims at making the context of this article clearer: In this situation we intentionally tie culture to a unit that is delignated by the borders of a nation-state (Weichhart 2017). We are doing this as the point of departure of this article — namely the question mentioned above — is based on a concept of culture defined by nationality and linguistic proficiency. However, another aspect thereof speaks for the conjunction of nation-state and culture in the context of this paper: it is generally concerned with scientific systems, which in turn are linked to the educational system and thus to the nation-state.

We argue that it is possible to establish a synthesis between different scientific systems through the transcultural researcher. Following what Rehbein (2013) introduces as "kaleidoskopische Dialektik" and Bhabha (2004) as "third space," synthesis refers to a complementation that includes the preservation of the previous elements not their dissolution, thus respecting their individual value. In consideration of the structural dependencies and power relations between the Global North and the Global South, widely explored and emphasized by postcolonial studies, this offers, then, a different approach than the historically grown dominance of the Eurocentric research approach.

Aside from a country's educational and scientific systems, and their historical evolution, research practice is deeply influenced also by the prevailing political culture. The research practice of Vietnam today is thus influenced by Confucian and Socialist traditions, colonial legacies, as well as the current politics of a single-party state. Foreign researchers conducting fieldwork in Vietnam, such as the two authors here, appear to hold a position of aliens in that world: while bringing links and legacies from their own scientific system, they can observe Vietnamese society and the local scientific system from the outside — and are also less vulnerable to the

political restriction of freedom of speech. However, while on an everyday level this comes with the disadvantages of needing to navigate through red tape and sometimes having to defend research approaches to Vietnamese counterparts, we argue that it confers also distinct advantages through the synthesis mentioned above.

The paper presents evidence, based on the authors' own experiences during fieldwork, leading to conclusions as to where conditions for such synthesis are favorable. An example for synthesis would be the use of language during field research in Vietnam. Language can open doors, especially in the access to interview partners — and having a closer look at language patterns in a foreign one can open new perspectives.

We will start with a presentation of a theoretical framework for the statements made above, establishing the transcultural researcher as a migrant with a unique perspective on the studied research topic and area. The following section will then introduce a few aspects of the Vietnamese research system. The two examples of research by German doctoral candidates will be presented in the fourth section, and will put the framework into practice. Finally, by way of closing, we will discuss if those examples can be transferred to other ones elsewhere.

The researcher as a migrant

Transcultural research in social sciences and humanities today is usually conducted in the context of a long-term stay within the society that is the object of study. This is especially true for ethnographic research, but also in the fields of Sociology or Regional Studies (Kruse et al. 2012a: 13–14). Conducting research in a foreign country requires knowledge about the population's social practices, insight which can only be acquired through engaging directly with that culture (Cappai 2008a: 23). This form of travel with the purpose of collecting research data is also discussed under the notion of "scientific tourism" (Thurner 2009). Thurner describes it as "professional journeys in the service of science, for example, to conduct research or sometimes the participation on conventions, congresses, symposia, and conferences" (2009: 156). Schlehe (2003: 37), on the other hand, concludes that researchers are not tourists per se, but rather take on multiple roles during a research trip. One of these is that of a tourist, specifically when we are not directly at the research site but merely in the local surroundings. Nevertheless we argue that transcultural researchers are rather temporary migrants. They move for a time to a country that is not their native one, and shift their daily life there.

Continuing this thought, the researcher does not arrive at the research site as a blank page that should be written on. Researchers are embedded in their own cultural practices, and in knowledge that was acquired previous to conducting this particular research (Breuer 2010: 26–27). This includes also their educational background, and thus as European researchers clearly in that Eurocentric view that Rehbein (2013) describes.

Rehbein (2013) establishes that there are multiple epistemic traditions, among which the Eurocentric tradition is only one of many. Nevertheless it is the most dominant tradition due to the power dynamics that still shape the world today. European researchers conducting research in Vietnam are thus in a situation where their dominant epistemic tradition comes face to face with an already existing Vietnamese one. This converging of research practices will be at the center of the theoretical framework presented here.

Returning to the idea of the transcultural researcher as a migrant to the culture being studied, the concept that is applied here is that of "third space." With a background in literary studies, Bhabha (2004) develops his theory of third space by analyzing colonial and postcolonial literary texts and artistic objects. He focuses on the cultural encounter within the (post)colonial context in the former colonies and in the metropoles as well. In this regard both colonizers and colonized are at the core of this theory. Bhabha describes the cultural (post)colonial encounter as a conflictual and complex phenomenon. For an appropriate understanding of how this cultural encounter takes place, Bhabha introduces the concepts of "hybridity" further to the aforementioned one of third space.

Hybridity is not just an intermixture as it was introduced in biology, but derives from complex cultural formations within colonial situations. These formations lead to hierarchical and asymmetric configurations that hold a destabilizing potential (Kerner 2012: 126). Furthermore, hybridity can be understood as a space of discourse and language. Within this space, cultural meanings will be linguistically constructed and deconstructed. They are permanently renegotiated. In this regard third space is a conceptual metaphor of hybridity (Struve 2013: 103, 123).

The third space as a space in-between is constituted through an intermixture of various cultures, which does not lead to their dissolving but rather to the forming of a fresh space of negotiation and new translations. Although Bhabha evolves the third space concept within the colonial cultural encounter, the theory is helpful to more broadly understand the ways in which scientific systems can complement and enrich each other. Furthermore it shows how the transcultural researcher in the third space contributes to the renegotiation of social practice, through their presence at the research site. As a visitor to the society in question, the researcher will interact and will exchange knowledge and perspectives.

Rehbein's starting point is his critique of the Eurocentric approach to science and research. He argues that the Eurocentric epistemic tradition views the world as a totality (*Totalität*), and thus inherently follows a universalist approach. The world is seen as one object where theories apply for the whole object. The diversity and variation that according to Rehbein is evident even in the Eurocentric approach itself, as different theories exist side by side therein, is ignored — or, at best, noted, but not developed any further. This is independent of diverging schools of thought pursuing variations of theoretical conceptions about how humans arrive at their

knowledge. The aim always appears to be the perfect knowledge. Universalism implies an omniscience of the researcher that must be questioned in the multicentric world that we live in today. This view of the world leads to an unescapable aporia, as the researcher is always embedded in the society that is the object of the research (Rehbein 2013: 98–99).

As Rehbein argues based on his review of epistemic history, there is no perfect knowledge that encapsulates all that there is to know. There will always be aspects to be added; this is due to the position of the scientist. The scientist is necessarily imbedded in their native social setting, thus viewing the object of their research from their own individual perspective. As it becomes obvious that the world is not a totality and that omniscience is an illusion that European research has chosen to follow a new approach has come about by necessity. Rehbein concludes that there are multiple perspectives that should be viewed as related but nevertheless existing side by side. In a new epistemic culture it is necessary to relate these perspectives, and through this act arrive at new perceptions and knowledge (Rehbein 2013: 97–98). As we argued earlier, the transcultural researcher is a migrant and inescapably renegotiates cultural practice and meanings at the research site.

The "kaleidoskopische Dialektik" that he proposes is an answer to the reemerging pluralism in the world, and develops the Eurocentric perspective further in those aspects where it lacks the ability to adapt to the newly found multicentered view. First of all, it is an approach that emphasizes the need to accept the creation of new knowledge as a process wherein different perspectives are established and become interconnected with each other. This process of bringing theories and perspectives into relationship with each other is based on the acknowledgement of different contexts. Thus, second, the aim cannot be to find one theory that will fit all contexts, but rather to discover a multitude of theories that are inspired by variations in context and to link these together through finding the connections between them (Rehbein 2013: 112–115).

To conclude this brief overview, a short framework should be constructed. First of all, in our view the transcultural researcher is at the same time a migrant to the society — or societies, of course — where research is being implemented, as well as a subject influenced by their own native context — and thus creating a unique perspective on the object of research. Second, while taking into account the context of the object of research, including its history and language, the transcultural researcher can develop a relationship between different perspectives through the open acknowledgement of their own unique context.

Science and research in Vietnam

The following section casts a glance at the epistemic research culture in Vietnam with which foreign researchers have to deal during fieldwork there. For example, the influences of hierarchical thinking, governmental control over research, and the

dominance of quantitative research approaches. These observations will then be presented in the sections that follow.

Confucian and Socialist traditions

What appears to be evident in everyday research practice in Vietnam is that, on the one hand, it appears to be strongly influenced by a hierarchical mindset that does not encourage the challenging of either senior researchers or higher-ranking research institutions and government agencies. On the other, methodological approaches are mainly quantitative — while qualitative ones seem to lack reputation. Since research practice can only partly be separated from the education system of the country in question, it appears reasonable to take a short look at the development of the education system of Vietnam so as to establish the background for the two observations stated above.

One of the most prominent influences on the Vietnamese education system is Confucianism, or more precisely the reformed variety thereof of Neo-Confucianism — which is deeply anchored in Vietnamese society (Tran 2013). Neo-Confucian ethics put a strong emphasis on social order within communities. There are important principles such as filial piety, the obedience of wives, daughters, and sisters toward their male counterpart, and respect for elders, among others (Jamieson 1993). These principles have been engraved in all aspects of society, from the family as the smallest nucleus thereof, through the village up to the royal court and the relationship between subjects and the government of the country. While it is undisputed therefore that Neo-Confucianism has a significant influence on the education system of Vietnam, the degree to which this is the case is questioned (London 2011; Woodside 1976, 1989, 1998; Zink 2013).

Introduced during the era of Chinese domination, Confucian education aimed not to enlighten the masses but to create an elite that was able to support the ruler. As Zink (2013: 25) notes regarding Chinese formal education in Vietnam, the aim of the education system and its examinations was merely to produce administrators — and not to educate researchers who would produce new findings and interpretations of the world. The Chinese educational tradition was focused on observing and recording phenomena, and not — as in Western scientific philosophy — on searching for causality and framing scientific laws. Nevertheless, both approaches had a common goal as they intended to provide a "better understanding of the world" (Zink 2013: 26). In precolonial Vietnam, however, formal education through schools was a privilege that only a small percentage of Vietnamese people could enjoy. Most children were educated through village schools, families, and village life, institutions influenced by Neo-Confucianism but also Buddhism, Taoism, village codes, as well as local traditions (London 2013).

In the 19th century the French began to gain importance in Vietnam, first as missionaries then in the form of colonial rulers. While France had a similar interest

to the Chinese occupiers earlier, namely to produce administrative staff, they nonetheless brought their own schooling system. During most of the colonial occupation from 1862 to 1954, traditional Vietnamese and French schools existed side by side — but the number of Vietnamese ones was gradually reduced, and finally in 1919 the examinations of Confucian scholars ended. Instead of Confucian classics, the French schools' curriculum taught French literature. Although it was not part of the formal curriculum, the "informal curriculum which dominated their lives remained Confucian" (Woodside 1989: 145).

Most of the Vietnamese communist revolutionaries that led the fight for independence in the 1940s and 1950s were educated in Neo-Confucian philosophy (Nguyễn Khắc Viện, cited in Woodside 1998). As Woodside carves out, Confucianism and Marxism have "an alleged common emphasis upon the totality of human beings' social connections and a dislike of individualism" which "made Communism more palatable to the children of Vietnam's Confucian elite" (1989: 145). Hồ Chí Minh combined in his revolutionary thinking, for example, his experiences of Confucian morals, colonial education, and Marxism (Großheim 2011). However one of the core aims of the Communist Party of Vietnam after gaining power in North Vietnam in 1945 was the abolishment of the "old culture" of Vietnam, which was perceived as backward and hindering the Communist transformation of the society. This resulted in the modification of traditional rituals and the abolishment of festivities (Malarney 2002). This rejection of traditional cultural elements included fundamental criticisms of the Neo-Confucian education and schooling that had as its aim the creation of Socialist subjects (London 2013: 14).

What can be learned from this short — and clearly not comprehensive — overview is that, through different systems of governance, the Confucian core survived in Vietnamese society and found its expression in the foundations of Communist philosophy as introduced by the Communist Party of Vietnam.

European involvement and the politics of science

Restrictions on the freedom of science as a result of the contemporary political system of Vietnam, as well as the dependence of researchers on financial support, is the second aspect that can be noted by foreign researchers as being part of the epistemic culture of Vietnam. At the same time, in a methodological sense these restrictions appear to be connected to the introduction of Eurocentric approaches. The following section will therefore scrutinize the introduction of a Eurocentric epistemic model in Vietnam under colonial rule and follow its path until today, with a focus particularly on the question of the freedom of science.

Colonialization was the first cornerstone on the way to introducing Eurocentric science to Vietnam. However the so called "*mission civilisatrice*" of the French colonizers was rather hallmarked by different phases of cultural transfer than by the

uniform introduction of "Western" education and ideas (Vu 1978: 217). Research about Vietnamese society and history, as well as geographical and agricultural research by French scholars during the colonial occupation, was mainly driven by the intention to support French rule (Lê 2006; Tran and Reid 2006).[1] Research by Vietnamese was absent under French rule, even after the University of Indochina had opened its doors in 1906. The sole intention in founding this university was that future graduates from it would contribute to the economic growth of the colony (Zink 2013: 37).

After independence, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North took over the Soviet model for higher education and research. This included a hierarchical system with a strong top-down approach. Planning was done on the central level, and research institutes as well as universities were organized along administrative levels. The Soviet education system followed the assumption that a hierarchical structure in education and science would lead to competitiveness and the building of an elite who would drive science and technology forward (Tran 2013: 633; Zink 2013: 43; Woodside 1998: 16). After reunification this system was step by step transferred to the South.

The Soviet model also had implications for the institutional organization of science and education. Regarding the personnel structure in education, both the Confucian and Soviet education model favored an environment where "the teacher is often considered the primary source of knowledge" and hence they are the "first knower," resulting in an atmosphere where critics are suppressed (Woodside 1998: 16; Tran 2013: 633). The introduction of reforms in Vietnam at the 6th Party Congress in 1986 had and still has consequences in every aspect of Vietnamese society, including science and education. It was hoped that the launching of *đổi mới* ("renovation") would evoke a "climate of openness, self-criticism, and renovation in and outside the Party [that] makes Party leadership and orientation to Party ideology less definite and restrictive in relation to social science" (Dahlström 1988: 110). However 30 years after the formal introduction of the reform process, the Vietnamese educational as well as research system still remain to be centrally organized (Bauer 2011).

The aim of Socialist research was to produce knowledge that was "national, scientific, popular" (Zink 2013: 44). This referred to a quantitative and technical methodology that produced development-related output that could be directly applied. This positivistic and Socialist paradigm in empirical social sciences is still predominant, as "apolitical quantitative methods," and is only slowly being modified. This means that quantitative methods are often favored over, for example, in-depth interviews or oral histories (Scott et al. 2006: 31). Even Vietnamese

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1   This kind of domination of the Western world over the colonized countries, with all its implications of exploitation, subordination, and the repression of the colonized, is mentioned and discussed within the discourse of "Orientalism" as first introduced by Said (2010).

researchers rather try to confirm given state decisions found in research results that have been obtained from quantitative methods (Scott et al. 2006: 33).

With *đổi mới*, the state as the main financial source for research is offset by other ones such as "private funding, self-funding, and direct foreign funding" (Zink 2013: 50). Cooperation between foreign researchers, universities, and companies and Vietnamese scientists has become an important form of funding for Vietnamese researchers. Bauer (2011: 100) estimates that about 50 percent of the funding of research at Vietnamese universities derives from international organizations, while that source of funding is not as important for ministerial research institutes. Zink (2013) also emphasizes the importance of international contacts and cooperation for Vietnamese scientists, whereas he puts the focus specifically on the personal connections developing through these links.

This brief overview has demonstrated the various degrees of governmental influence and control over research in Vietnam as well as the dominance of the Eurocentric research approach. The technical approaches to research that were dominant during the central planning phase prior to *đổi mới* are still applied today. However nowadays applied research is not only supported by the government but by international organizations.

Doing research in Vietnam — Foreigners' experiences

The following section will present two research projects conducted by German doctoral candidates in Vietnam, to exemplify the previously made observations about the current situation of transcultural research.

Research and cultures in-between

The topic of the first research approach is tourism and identity formation processes of overseas Vietnamese (Việt Kiều). The researcher analyzes the cultural negotiation and identity formation process of Việt Kiều from Germany while traveling in Vietnam (Schiele 2017). The framework of this research project will be explained first, and then follows how the use of language can enrich the research by applying the abovementioned theories.

A transcultural and mobile research project
Việt Kiều are scattered around the world. Migration occurred as a consequence of war, to take up positions as contract workers in the former Soviet bloc, for reasons of marriage, or for family reunification. After *đổi mới*, restrictions for Việt Kiều traveling to Vietnam were loosened and so their number increased (Thai 2009; Waibel 2004; Alneng 2002).

Before starting fieldwork in Vietnam in 2013, the researcher became acquainted with Vietnamese culture, society, and with the language during a 14-month stay from 2009 until 2011. Contacts with Vietnamese made during that stay in the

country helped to reflect upon and discuss the challenges and questions that arose during the interviews. Research participants were free to choose the language of the interview. Some of the first generation of Việt Kiều chose to communicate with the researcher in Vietnamese and expressed their surprise at the researcher's language skills and cultural knowledge about the country. These circumstances always contributed to a warm and open-minded conversation.

Before starting her fieldwork, the researcher received research permission and a visa with help from a university in Hanoi. For further research in archives, libraries, and relevant institutes the red stamp being on the official letter of permission (Turner 2013) was essential.

Eight interviewees belonged to the first generation, those who were born in Vietnam and left the country, and nine to the second generation, those who spent their childhood in Germany and Switzerland and who are thus native German speakers. The researcher conducted interviews in Vietnamese with four of them; the others preferred to communicate in German.

Enriching perspectives through language

The use of the term Việt Kiều will illustrate how controversial terminology within this research project was. While Việt Kiều is used in Vietnam to indicate Vietnamese living abroad, it seemed questionable whether that group of people would use the term themselves.

The first step is to look into the wider subjective and objective meaning of the words Việt Kiều. The term means *người Việt ở nước ngoài*, translated as "Vietnamese living abroad." An almost identical term for that is *người Việt hải ngoại*, which can be translated as "overseas Vietnamese." The former is used officially, whereas Việt Kiều is considered an informal term (Carruthers 2008; Koh 2015). Dang states more precisely that originally the word *Kiều* "was used to denote people from one country coming to live in another country," where they lead "economic, social, cultural, and political lives" but are still tied in a sense of nostalgia to the home country (2000: 185).

Dang further explains how the meaning of the term changed over time. Before 1975 it was unproblematic, because the few Vietnamese living abroad supported the Vietnamese state. A semantic change began in the aftermath of war, however. Thousands of Vietnamese refugees were regarded as traitors of the North Vietnamese government and thus the term took on negative connotations. A turnaround took place with the advent of *đổi mới*, as the government tried to mitigate the former built-up tensions by focusing on a common cultural heritage and a shared bloodline that binds all Vietnamese scattered around the world together (Koh 2015). This semantic evolution of the term illustrates the symbolic dimension to it and the importance of state discourse.

This subjective approach to the term Việt Kiều points to a wider dimension too, and consequences for its use as an identification marker of the target research group. Most of the research participants define Việt Kiều as "Vietnamese living and settling abroad." More identifying criteria were added: duration of living abroad, German citizenship, "full-Vietnamese," "half-Vietnamese," or "Germans of Vietnamese descent." One interviewee referred to the behavior and the look of Việt Kiều, with it being said to be different to that of Vietnamese — so that the latter can spot the former right away. They also associate the term with people who are lost and located culturally in-between. This is specifically within the third space, where Việt Kiều neither belong to the country of residence nor to the one of origin. In contrast to Bhabha's third space, however, the interviewees regarded this in-between state as rather negative, and not as a space where belonging can be negotiated and new possibilities for identification open up.

The researcher also found herself in-between two cultures, and negotiating between them. Sometimes a "third culture" was relevant when it came to the question of the researcher's home. The statement that she was born in the German Democratic Republic caused positive surprise and encouraged exchange.

During the interviews the question of what interviewees believed the words Việt Kiều to mean revealed their strong impressions about what Vietnamese may think the term meant — hence it was regarded as an attribution by others. Interviewees had in mind that Vietnamese associate the term with rich, arrogant, and big-headed people, ones unable to communicate in Vietnamese. Contrariwise, interviewees mentioned their own associations with the term as being thrifty and hard-working people in the country of residence.

These two subjective semantic meanings of the term Việt Kiều can be supplemented with a third perspective showing how the term was used by the interviewees to identify themselves. A difference was found here between the first and the second generation. The first generation does not use the term for themselves. For them it is quite clear that they are Vietnamese no matter how long they have already lived in Germany; they are called Việt Kiều only by other Vietnamese. For the second generation, meanwhile, it depends on specific circumstances. In one situation they may refer to themselves as Việt Kiều, in others as German or Vietnamese. This situational identification depends on communication processes with a constitutive outside.

An example of one interviewee, belonging to the second generation, illustrates this. The interviewee did not use the term to refer to herself as well as the whole generation because she was not born in Vietnam, although her parents are Vietnamese. For herself she would prefer the identification "German with Vietnamese roots." She opposes being called Việt Kiều by Vietnamese because of the term's connotations, especially when it comes to her Vietnamese language skills. Her mother tongue is not Vietnamese, but the words Việt Kiều would imply that she

speaks Vietnamese fluently. She had experienced Vietnamese insulting her for her apparent lack of Vietnamese language skills. To avoid this, she thus introduces herself as German with Vietnamese roots. One time in Vietnam, she described how a friend blamed her for not being able to understand a situation due to being German. She was hurt by that accusation, and insisted that she is not German but rather Vietnamese. This example shows that situational identification is a strategy to negotiate language and power discourses.

This section has shown that the researcher's Vietnamese language skills enriched the perspective of those interviews conducted in Vietnamese. It created an environment for intimate personal conversation and cultural understanding. The researcher herself was also familiar with both cultures, German and Vietnamese, which contributed to an enriching of the European research perspective. The researcher had to renegotiate and translate the pre-given signs and meanings in every interview situation anew.

Furthermore language and power discourses were explained through the various ascriptions inherent in the term Việt Kiều. The situational identification with the term has shown a linguistic and power-related — however subconscious — strategy to communicate with Vietnamese while traveling. This strategy takes place in a third space. The in-between is characterized by a complementation of German and Vietnamese cultural knowledge, where language is used to negotiate between cultures in every situation differently — so that linguistic and cultural signs and meanings are in a constant flux of (re)negotiation, appropriation, and translation.

Research environments and environmental research

The second of the two illustrative research projects was implemented in the southeast of Vietnam, and was concerned with human–environment relations (Fuhrmann 2017). Due to economic growth as well as a burgeoning population that is becoming more affluent and consuming more, pressure on the natural environment has increased. Nevertheless heavy industry, intensive agriculture, extractive industries, and inefficient environmental standards all previously existed (DiGregorio et al. 2003: 191). The Vietnamese government began to react to these issues first during the 1990s, and continues still now to build a legal and administrative framework to protect the natural environment (Bach Tan Sinh 2003). However pollution and the overexploitation of resources continue at alarming speed. While most research on environmental issues in Vietnam puts a focus on technical or administrative matters, the research presented here was directed at understanding cognitive aspects of human–environment relations in Vietnam — including people's knowledge about nature, their attitudes toward it, and their perception or not of changes occurring. A qualitative research approach was chosen to address this topic. During the fieldwork, 24 qualitative interviews were conducted in one hamlet in the southeast of Vietnam.

A stationary and local research project

As described in the previous instance, research had to be implemented in cooperation with a local research institute. Here as well the research institute organized permits and the necessary paperwork to conduct interviews. However, as a contrast to the research presented before, there was more involvement this time by the affiliated research institute, presumably due to the different group of interview partners as a consequence of the research topic at hand. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese with the help of an interpreter, who at the same time was the research assistant assigned to the project by the Vietnamese research institute.[2] Clearly this created a different situation during the interviews, and also a different starting point for the analysis of data collected via them.

The situation also led to an alternate way of preparing the research process. Working with a person in the middle made it necessary to arrive at a common understanding of research aim and methods. The qualitative research approach, with a rather broad focus, represented a challenge due to bias against qualitative research by the research assistant and other Vietnamese researchers involved. Another objection by the Vietnamese counterparts was the rather broad topic, and so it was suggested to rather include only one "natural resource." While this proposition was denied as it would change the research topic, an important contribution to the development of instruments was the discussion of the interview guidelines — where the exact wording was amended as a result.

Although the exchange with the research assistant was very fruitful for the research, regulations demanding a representative of the research site's administration be present would in some cases lead to a situation where one interview partner would face three people "on the other side." A rather intimidating situation, then. However the research assistant was also helpful in establishing good relations with interview partners.

Getting to know the context

As in the previous example, the researcher had a well-established knowledge of the country due to several prior visits and prolonged stays in Vietnam. During those stays, the exchange with local Vietnamese residents became an important aspect of everyday life. The numerous daily activities served as an important preparation for research, even though they did not seem related to the research topic at first sight. These everyday activities place the researcher in a situation where social practices have to be reinterpreted. They include basic daily necessities such as eating together or shopping. But they also include the participation in festivities and getting acquainted with the customs of those encountered.

An important aspect of research was the exchange between researcher and research assistant after conducting interviews every day. This exchange sometimes also

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2   On the role of the research assistant in the research process, see for example Bonnin (2013).

included members of the local administration. Often there was the chance to reflect on observations with interview partners after the interview had officially concluded. In these situations, interview partners were eager to learn more about the researcher and her background. These informal exchanges contributed to more fruitful interaction in both directions, and resulted in new perspectives on the research topic. For example, the informal conversation with some interview partners about activities during their spare time resulted from the question about these things in Germany and helped the researcher to get a better understanding of life in the hamlet. Another example would be the description of life in the hamlet during the war, as recounted by some older interview partners. While there were diverging descriptions of this time, it opened up interesting views for the researcher.

These experiences during the research process are not singular to the project described here. However they can serve as an example for the situation of the transcultural researcher in a setting such as this one. Instead of building on a rapport between researcher, research assistant, and interview partner already available as in the previous example, these foundations instead had to be established from scratch. It moved the researcher from a position as an uninvolved bystander to the object of research as well.

Navigating through words and meanings

Although implemented in a different manner than the previously presented research project, language also played a crucial role in the one here. It was mentioned that interviews were conducted in Vietnamese with the help of an interpreter. The researcher in this case could speak Vietnamese to a level of everyday interaction, but there was the risk that difficulties in the use of the language appeared during the course of an interview. It was feared that this could lead interview partners to either adapt their way of articulating themselves to the language level of the researcher or she might have had to interrupt respondents to clarify a point.

This clearly put a different weight on the issue of preparation of interviews, as well as the exchange between translator/research assistant and researcher both before and after each interview. Research tools were translated into Vietnamese by the researcher and assistant together. However finding the right words for the interview guidelines was difficult, as words and meanings were sometimes not even clear to the native speaker. One example was the exact translation of the word "nature." The issue was first discovered while preparing the interview guidelines. There exist two phrases that could be translated as "nature" or "natural," *thiên nhiên* and *tự nhiên*. During the interviews both the interpreter and the interview partners used the two interchangeably, although they used the words *tự nhiên* about twice as often as *thiên nhiên*. The words brought up by interview partners when talking about nature revealed more about their personal definition of the term. Another, *môi trường* ("environment"), was one mentioned very often and also linked to the words *thiên nhiên*. Interview partners described their surroundings, and what they would identify

as "nature" within them. This would vary from "no nature at all," since everything in their surroundings was made by humans, to those who would describe plants and even old buildings as "natural." The term *tài nguyên*, meaning "natural resources," was also used, though less often, to refer to the significance of nature for humans. At different points of the analysis native speakers were asked to comment and confirm translations by the researcher. However, also in these situations the impossible task of simply translating words verbatim became evident.

Clearly, a native speaker would have had different possibilities in conducting the interviews. At this point, however, the transcultural researcher was able to open up a new view on the research topic especially as a result of her not being a native speaker of Vietnamese. Questioning the everyday use of words opened the space for renegotiation. As Rehbein (2013: 128) proposes, the learning of multiple languages is what makes this kind of research so valuable then.

Conclusion: The possibility of synthesis

The question that was raised in the introduction to this article was if transcultural research is as viable as that by those native to a given country, as they inherently carry the relevant local knowledge and language skills. Certainly it is out of the question to abolish all transcultural research. There are numerous works that give hints about a fruitful research process outside of the researcher's society of origin. The issue of language is one that is particularly present in this context, but so is the acquiring of knowledge of the local culture.[3] The question of why this kind of research is necessary when there are clearly already many well-educated researchers native to those countries working away is, however, a less often debated one. It seems that in this context the idea of European researchers spreading out to discover other cultures is so familiar that it is hardly even questioned.

It was the aim of this article to establish the argument that the need for transcultural research arises out of the researchers themselves being able to contribute in specific ways, but ones not superior or inferior to those of a native researcher. To achieve this aim, two cases were presented. Both were qualitative research projects in the field of cultural studies, and were implemented by German researchers in Vietnam. They had well-founded knowledge of Vietnam through extended stays in the country prior to conducting research, had been in close exchange with Vietnamese people, and had knowledge of the Vietnamese language. This enabled them to navigate through administrative procedures and everyday phenomena. While initially there were obvious similarities, differences became apparent that led to diverging experiences during the research process however.

One of the research projects focused on the topic of migration and tourism, as well as identity. It was executed in a mobile format, with the researcher traveling to meet

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3   See for example Kruse et al. (2012b), Turner (2013), or Cappai (2008b).

previously determined interview partners — who were themselves traveling and had the background of being Vietnamese migrants living in Germany. Interview partners were therefore familiar with parts of the researcher's country of residence, its history, language, and everyday practices. They were able to speak to the researcher directly, shared the experience of the cultural in-between, and could thus establish a fruitful connection. The researcher's ties to the affiliated Vietnamese research institution were rather loose, and the incidents where the researcher was confronted with red tape were limited to only when in contact with formal institutions.

The second research project was about environmental issues. The researcher was closely linked to the research institution through a research assistant and continuous exchange with the staff of that institute. The experiences of red tape and restrictions to moving freely were more common in this example. The interview partners were residents in one particular hamlet, and were selected by authorities on both the hamlet and village level. They were not familiar with the researcher's background, and the conversations had to be conducted through an interpreter. The obstacles to establishing a fruitful rapport between interview partners and researcher were therefore more obvious. However the mutual exchange in creating beforehand a context for the interviews added valuable information to the research.

The theoretical framework stated two assumptions for the analysis of the cases that were presented in this article. The first was that of the transcultural researcher as a migrant who interacted in a third space, as everyday practices had to be renegotiated. The other was that of the transcultural researcher introducing a new perspective to research due to their unique position. Further, the transcultural researcher is at the nexus of at least two epistemic cultures.

Despite their differences, the two examples presented here provide evidence for these two assumptions being correct. The central theme of language stands out in both examples: In the first, the special position of the transcultural researcher became evident in light of the term Việt Kiều. Because of the cultural in-between of the researcher, she could renegotiate pre-given meanings of words as they were inscribed in this term. The second case, meanwhile, highlighted the necessity to renegotiate terms regarding the use of the word "nature" and its direct translation into Vietnamese. Here, the researcher renegotiated the words together with the translator and interview partners, as the meanings of everyday words were questioned. While they were only a snapshot and individual, as the different circumstances and experiences showed, the conclusion derived from the two examples is that trans-cultural research can indeed create a synthesis, as initially proposed.

To conclude, we would like to emphasize the relevance of our findings by extending our advocacy for transcultural research to that which is directed from the Global South to the Global North. In the authors' own experience, researchers from the Global South studying at universities in the Global North — at least in the Social

Sciences — tend to focus on their societies of origin. Fruitful exchange would clearly emphasize the need for ethnographic research by those from the Global South that is conducted in the Global North.

However, as mentioned in the introduction, to connect the concept of culture to national boundaries and identities is to neglect the various everyday practices of inhabitants within one nation-state. The first research project represents a vivid example of this. Therefore the idea of transcultural research, as we have defined it in this article, should also be applied in the context of that conducted within one given country.

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