

Conclusion to chapters 5 & 6: Oriental Identities in Super-Diverse Britain: Young Vietnamese in London,
Tamsin Barber

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Conclusion to chapter 5: Counter-Orientalisms and the Politics of Hair, Clubbing and Dating

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This chapter has explored how strategies of counter-Orientalism have been deployed and performed by British-born Vietnamese men and women as a way of disrupting coercive Orientalist discourses. These have illuminated both the active and reflexive role taken by participants in their own identity construction. By creatively engaging with processes of exclusion and inclusion the narratives reveal the different strategies available to young Vietnamese men and women to manipulate and resist stereotypes while asserting a sense of belonging in multicultural Britain. Young Vietnamese men and women deploy their personal agency differently to manage their social positioning in British society using distinctive strategies relating to their gendered, ethnicised and class locations and outcomes. While processes of self-Orientalism and auto-exoticising expressed in style, dress and image, has enabled young men to cultivate a stronger sense of belonging in Britain connected to a pan-ethnic Oriental collectivity, Vietnamese women, by contrast, rely upon more discursive internal-Orientalist strategies to re-draw moral boundaries associated with the policing of gender and ethnicised notions of sexuality, propriety and availability. Paying attention to the intersections of gender, race and class has emphasised the ways in which Vietnamese masculinities are particularly at stake in Orientalist racialisations. By contrast, Vietnamese femininities appear to have been less overtly problematised in discourses of Orientalism through the positioning of Vietnamese femininity as ostensibly 'positive' (hyper-feminine) in relation to the white, patriarchal, mainstream norm. Nevertheless, they have a coercive and restrictive impact upon identity, especially where polarised notions of passivity versus promiscuity are called into being.

Strategies of self-Orientalising can be seen as both a project of collective identity formation and of personal identity formation, sometimes acting as a resource for individualisation and as distancing from the ‘Oriental’ category. This chapter has also argued that agency through the form of counter-Orientalism consists of more than just discursive responses, but instead invokes an embodied and fleshy self in participants construction of self – indicating the relevance of both symbolic interactionist and post-structuralist accounts of the self. However, the extent to which practices of self-Orientalism, auto-exoticisation and internal-Orientalism are effective in disrupting more permanent coercive discourses must be considered carefully. For this it is useful to return to drawing upon Butler’s distinction between discursive subversion as ‘consolidating’ existing discourses versus providing the ‘occasion for subversion’. It could be argued that although aesthetic strategies create a space for a wider interpretation and variation of images of East and Southeast Asian masculinities in Western societies, the very strategy of countering racism by becoming more visible as an Oriental is in itself problematic. Notably, to the less discerning eye, their subtle strategies and performances of resistance could be read as simply reinforcing existing notions of the Oriental discourse, rather than as offering a substantial alternative. For example, as we saw in the first section, hairstyles provided young men with an identity resource allowing them to creatively build upon pre-existing public perceptions and recognisable Oriental tropes. This was not a specifically Vietnamese resource but involved cultural borrowing from other groups (Japanese and Korean). Other attempts were made through individualist internal-Orientalising, which in contrast to self-Orientalism and auto-exoticism involved a rejection of collective identity tropes as the basis for forging accounts which were based on an opposition to this. Total freedom from stereotypes and forms of categorisation was never completely obtained and as Matthew notes ‘you are never likely to be seen as just an individual’ but instead as Chinese or Vietnamese. Strategies of counter-Oriental femininities and

masculinities in fact revealed how enduring Orientalised gender stereotypes are due to the limited recognisable repertoires outside of this discourse (as seen in the case of Kim Ly). Strategies engaging directly in transforming the Orientalised discourses around gender through subversion seem at this stage to remain rather subtle from the perspective of substantially transforming the Oriental category. In the next chapter, processes of exclusion and belonging in the ethnic community are explored in more depth.

Chapter 6 conclusion: Navigating 'the Vietnamese Community': Local and Transnational Belongings

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This chapter has shown how the dominant notion of community as 'consensual' and 'cohesive' does not capture the experience of young British-born Vietnamese in London. Instead, for this group, the local Vietnamese community is experienced as internally divided and at times exclusionary, according to predominating perceptions of belonging and authenticity. Reflecting upon the community configurations discussed in Chapter 1, this chapter has shown how the British-born Vietnamese experience of community is still strongly shaped by parents' migratory origins. Participants from North and South Vietnamese backgrounds are still best placed to draw upon these respective networks rather than broader British-based ones, and participants' constructions of the community also differ according to these networks. Neighbourhood was also another important factor shaping community, as those living in more concentrated Vietnamese areas were more able to construct a sense of pan-ethnic local community compared to those from more sparsely populated Vietnamese areas who look to the diaspora to provide a sense of community and ethnic belonging. Generational relations were central to British-born members' sense of inclusion and exclusion from the Vietnamese community as they sometimes enabled access to ethnic

networks and at other times they precluded it due to younger members' sense of how they fitted within notions of Vietnamese authenticity.

In response to not fitting within the first generation versions of Vietnameseness and notion of community, British-born participants have arguably created their own personal communities of belonging through cultivation of more meaningful ethnic ties. The notion of the 'imagined community' is deemed important for individuals as a symbolic marker of their identity in wider society and in terms of personal identity. A sense of ethnic belonging and the notion of the personal community better captures the understanding of 'community' experienced by British-born members in London. Ethnic identification and ethnic belonging is instead constructed outside of the community in the transnational diaspora, the homeland, or within locally specific pan-ethnic second generation groups which act as imagined communities which resolve or by-pass problems of exclusion from the Vietnamese community based on claims to authenticity and second generation Vietnameseness.