

## **The Homeland as a Space of Materiality of Care and Dignity**

**Hung Cam Thai**

**Sociology at Pomona College of the Claremont University Consortium**

This paper examines the complex relationship between status-driven consumption and migrant return activities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Drawing on data that pinpoints what some scholars call the “materiality of care,” I chronicle the ways in which the homeland serves as a significant social space for immigrants to gain a sense of self-worth despite their status as low wage workers in the United States. As the largest city in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City has been enormously stratified due to the frequent return activities of low-wage overseas migrants, who despite their low-wage status overseas, bring back with them capital and engage in consumption practices that they may not otherwise be able to do in their overseas locations. The overseas migrants are thus visible in different hubs of the city for which they sometimes intersect with other global aspirants, ranging from foreign expats, regional capitalists, and the local new rich. This paper utilizes interviews with more than 100 respondents and seven years of ethnographic data to analyze the pleasures, contradictions, and tensions in the consumptionscape of the city from the vantage of the overseas working class. Key to my analysis is how and why the social interactions they generate serve to accentuate their sense of status and dignity given their experiences of financial exclusion abroad. For instance, while they may not be able to purchase private properties in fortified enclaves such as where foreign expats and their high-wage overseas peers live, they can be seen in consumptive transactions, if only temporarily, at high-end cafes, bars, and restaurants within fortified spaces. I analyze how these experiences are significant tactics for claiming a sense of belonging to the homeland given that many immigrants across the world are increasingly feeling precarious in their host countries.

### **Biography**

Hung Cam Thai is Full Professor of Sociology at Pomona College and the Claremont University Consortium, where he is Chair of the Department of Asian American Studies and Former Chair of Sociology. His first book, *For Better or for Worse: Vietnamese International Marriages in the New Global Economy* (Rutgers, 2008), is a study of international marriages linking women in Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese men living in the diaspora. His multiple award-winning second book, *Insufficient Funds: Money in Low Wage Transnational Families* (Stanford, 2014) examines how and why transnational families in the Vietnamese diaspora spend, receive, and give money. An award-winning teacher, he is a recipient of fellowships from the Haynes Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, National University of Singapore, and the Institute of East Asian Studies at Berkeley. He is currently writing a book about how people evaluate each other along lines of financial and moral worth in contemporary Vietnam.