

BREAK TIME EXCHANGES: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF “RESTING” SPACES AMONG THE VIETNAMESE-CZECH COMMUNITY IN SAPA, IN PRAGUE

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Abstract: *This study provides a snapshot of the social lives of primarily first-generation Vietnamese-Czech immigrants, who engage in small-scale merchant business at the Sapa market and cultural centre in Prague. To add to the existing research on the Vietnamese immigrant community in the Czech Republic, the research shifts from studying the immigrant community’s identity as business owners to their identities as cultural participants by observing the community’s interactions during break times. The researcher utilizes the framework of spatializing culture to focus on how such interactions help socially construct and transform the resting spaces, existing in both the physical and online worlds of the Sapa market and cultural space. This ethnographic study combines participant observation, insider ethnography, visual mapping, and visual and digital ethnography. The fieldwork reveals that the physical and digital rest areas of Sapa help facilitate ethnic identity construction and preservation among the community members.*

Keywords: *ethnography/netnography, online vs offline spaces, transnational community, Vietnamese-Czech immigrants, ethnic identity*

Introduction

Compared to other EU countries, the Vietnamese immigrant communities in the Czech Republic, primarily concentrated in Prague, are among the top five in terms of scale (Fiedlerová et al. 2016).¹ Vietnamese migration to the Czech Republic dates back to the early 1950s, when diplomatic relations between Vietnam and former Czechoslovakia were established. During the first wave of migrants, most Vietnamese came to the Czech Republic as communist cadres selected by the government to go overseas to receive education and technical training. In the 2000s, a group of first-generation Vietnamese immigrant businesspeople bought land previously used for poultry farms on the outskirts of Prague's city centre. There, they established a specific area dedicated to the Vietnamese immigrant community, allowing them to do business and trade, and named it Sapa (Rawitsch 2020). At present, Sapa, a Vietnamese trading centre and market located in Prague 4 – Libuš district of the City of Prague, Czech Republic – comprises 27 hectares.

Past research literature of Vietnamese transnational communities in Czech mainly focuses on the identities of the Vietnamese community members as business owners (Drbohlav and Čermáková 2016). However, this specific approach only allows viewing the Vietnamese immigrants' lives within the commercial and occupational context. The social identity given to the Vietnamese Czech as "immigrants" and as grocery store owners often reduces the members of the Vietnamese community to a stereotype and overlooks other aspects of their identity. Recent studies of immigrants have demonstrated the diversity and variety of adaptation among Vietnamese and other ethnic groups who have creatively reconstructed their migrant lives and identities (Nguyen 2016). Such adaptations would vary based on the cultural and historical contexts of originating and host countries. An example of this is the phenomenon of Vietnamese immigrant families hiring Czech nannies to care for their children while they are at work. The practice reveals the unique ways in which life in the new host country affects childcare arrangements and social norms about care work among the Vietnamese immigrant community in the Czech Republic (Souralova 2015).

¹ This study originated at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague as part of the project Construction of Social Space, and Collective Memory: A Case Study of Vietnamese Ethnic Enclaves in Prague, supported by special-purpose funds intended for the specific tertiary education research provided by the Ministry of Education in 2020.

This study thus centres on the patterns of socialization among first-generation Vietnamese immigrants in Sapa outside of their work sphere. The questions relevant to this study are: How do they carve out space and time for social lives when their work-life is intensive and takes up most of their day? What meanings, social connections, or rituals arise from such interactions? What kinds of spaces do they use in this regard? To answer these questions, I examine the self-made rest areas scattered within the Sapa market centre, as well as the digital “rest” and leisure areas in Facebook groups as critical hotspots for community socialization. Previous ethnography scholarship has especially analyzed meanings in spatial arrangements and regarded constructed environments as fundamental to social life (Lawrence and Low 1990; Spier 1933; Koroebor 1939). Using the social constructionist approach and Setha M Low’s (2000) framework of spatializing culture, I analyze how social relations, personal struggles, and certain cultural contestations are embedded and revealed in the social construction of these resting places. The ethnographic focus on studying space and place is critical, as they often function as sites of social identity construction and negotiation (Low 2016). Through social interactions with each other at these socially constructed spaces of leisure and rest, Sapa community members establish and strengthen each other’s social networks while also constructing their own social identities outside of being merchants in migrant worlds.

Goffman’s (1978) framework on role enactment and role distance is also helpful as groundwork for my analysis of socialization at rest areas in Sapa. These areas are where the members of the Vietnamese Czech community can establish and keep a comfortable distance from their public identity as merchants and service providers. During break times, these people temporarily leave their front stages of working life to interact with each other in Sapa’s semi-private backstage areas as members of the Vietnamese immigrant community. It is therefore necessary to study and observe Vietnamese Czech community members in their everyday interactions during rest times in these places of leisure and socialization. One can in this way identify and analyze which behavioural patterns or rituals become part of their strategies to maintain their ethnic identities and strengthen communal relationships. In other words, the knowledge and information these immigrant workers exchange and relay to one another over time within these temporal and spatial contexts can contribute to the overall preservation and construction of the Vietnamese identity of Vietnamese immigrants in Sapa.

Research Design

As the research intent of this work is interpretive, I rely on ethnography fieldwork based on participant observation supported by visual techniques, such as photographic analysis, to study how members of the Vietnamese community in Sapa socialize with each other during break times. For data collection, I created extensive field notes, wrote diary entries, and took photographs from June to October 2020. During the first fieldwork stage, I utilized the discursive walking method combined with photographic mapping to explore and document interactions in Sapa between the people and space. This type of “discursive walking” as a “participatory mode of walking, during which we half-consciously explore the landscape while sensorially experiencing it passing by” (Wunderlich 2008, 132), allowed me to gather data in two different layers: first, as a newcomer visiting and analytically exploring the new space, and second, as a Vietnamese expatriate who connects to the Vietnamese community with a sense of belonging. By analyzing this exploratory data, I realized that crucial socialization as a means of community building and social identity-construction strategies occur at Sapa’s rest areas, where community members interact in intimate and backstage forms.

As the study focuses on socialization around rest areas in Sapa, I chose one specific rest location: the wooden benches situated between a Czech-Vietnamese cafeteria and a small grocery store run by a middle-age Vietnamese couple. The area faces the entrance to Sapa through gate 4. This focus on one leisure spot allowed further, more focused participant observation fieldwork to establish stronger relationships with the place and the social networks based around this bench area. From June to September 2020, I visited the location three times a week; each visit usually lasted from three to five hours. During these visits, I observed, took notes, and participated in social interactions occurring at these benches, and also in front of the grocery store. In certain instances, the rest area became the backdrop to deep interactions that contributed to one’s ethnic identity construction or mediation through exchanges of memories and cultural heritage. In other instances, the rest area helped facilitate and maintain the organic expansion of a social network.

For observations of the Facebook group for Vietnamese living in the Czech Republic, I employed a digital ethnography approach. I took extensive notes and screenshots of significant interactions or conversations within the Vietnamese online community in the Facebook group called Cho Sapa tai Sec (Sapa Market

in the Czech Republic) in September and October 2020. Many researchers regard this online ethnographic approach as *netnography* (Hine 2000; Kozinets 2010). By combining the collection of screen-captured posts and shares and running them through a discourse analysis and textual analysis approaches, I took a closer look at people's engagement and interpersonal relations on these Facebook groups during their leisure times outside their work sphere.

In addition, I also followed reflexive forms of research practice within both the regular and digital ethnography process as I collected and analyzed the data. In this way, I gave recognition to how findings and knowledge about community interactions are produced through a combination of field note taking and my own participation in the social interactions in Sapa (James et al. 1997; Pink et al. 2015). The insider ethnographic approach was helpful as my insider position, based on shared ethnicity with the researched group, accelerated my socialization with others in Sapa as an outsider to this new immigrant community (e.g., Khan 2011). This initial outsider position also made me more sensitive to identify newness and strangeness while observing the lifestyles and interactions of the people there (Hastrup 1987). Mining the data gathered from surface-level interactions provided valuable insights into how resting areas, both physical and digital, as related to Sapa function as important sites of identity construction and community bonding outside work realms. All the names of the community members observed during the physical and digital ethnography fieldwork have been changed to Vietnamese pseudonyms to respect their anonymity and remove any identifying attributes.

The Significance of Rest Areas in Sapa

At the initial stage of the research process, I conducted extensive visual mapping of the space using photography while taking ethnographic walking trips to collect the overall details of how space and people interacted (see Figures 1 and 2). The walking trips helped me navigate the networks of subjects, objects, and spaces through which life in Sapa unites into a coherent existence (Latham and McCormack 2007). The fragmented stories and narratives collected through the waking ethnography approach helped me see Sapa with its complexities, not just as an area of micro and macro merchant business but also as a social hub for Vietnamese community connections (Cheng 2013).

When entering the area with my camera in hand, I found myself drawn to capturing various instances of assortments of old furniture usually set up in



Figure 1. Community members catching up with each other, captured in front of a restaurant entrance. Photo: Quynh Nguyen, 2020.

the intersections of paths or along the edges of commercial warehouses (see Figures 3 and 4). The collection and curation of furniture convey a sense of intentionality but also randomness. As I became interested in the functions of these “furnished” corners, I focused mainly on those places in my next field trip and found myself witnessing unique rhythms of social traffic around the area. The movement of bodies and the body itself becomes the template for spatial and social relations (Douglas 1971). Through tracking movements surrounding the space, I observed the transformation of space into a place for resting and socialization for the Czech Vietnamese community members in Sapa. This deliberate construction of social and physical areas is necessary to be looked at, especially when studying immigrant communities as these sites function as spaces of identity formation and heritage maintenance (Hall 2004; Li 2005; Meciar 2014).

On the first impression, the sightings of these rest areas make Sapa even more familiar to me because of the memories I have of the markets in Vietnam that I have often visited since I was young. These areas take up space immediately next to the people’s workplace; they are usually under some roof for



Figure 2. A small corridor with plastic chairs set up outside a barbershop as a waiting area for customers. The appearance of resting furniture in front of the barbershop can have an inviting effect on foot traffic surrounding this area; people are more likely to stop by and have a seat to chat with the business's owner or people they know. Photo: Quynh Nguyen, 2020.

Figure 3. A rest area set up right across from the working place of one merchant. During break time, the owner can offer tea from the kettle to facilitate more intimate conversations between friends and close acquaintances with the merchant. Photo: Quynh Nguyen, 2020.





Figure 4. An example of a rest area. Photo: Quynh Nguyen, 2020.

protection against the summer heat. The place is a literal collage of collected items and worn-out furniture combined into one cohesive structure: a small table with a scratched surface, mismatched chairs or stools, a large standing umbrella, and aged couches (see Figures 2, 3, and 4). However, these small, personalized rest areas are not usually for everyone to use. Only the people who set them up can invite people to socialize and chat there with them. As the rest areas are situated in open spaces, their owners and their acquaintances also socialize near them quite often, and thus also claim ownership to these public spaces.

On the other hand, there also exist those rest areas that are more for public use, thus more accessible, so even the random Sapa visitors can sit down and take a brief break from walking. These rest areas for public use are more standard and uniform, comprised of a few rows of long wooden benches and fitting tables. There are two such rest areas in front of the two Czech-Vietnamese cafeterias, which serve as places to eat for the cafeterias' customers and as temporary rest areas for others when the cafeterias are not so busy (see Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5: The wooden benches chosen for the case observations. The photos were taken during one of the lockdown restrictions given by the Czech government. I chose not to take photos of this location during fieldwork due to resistance from the observed community and the potential disrupting effects on the on-going fieldwork itself. Photo: Quynh Nguyen, 2020.

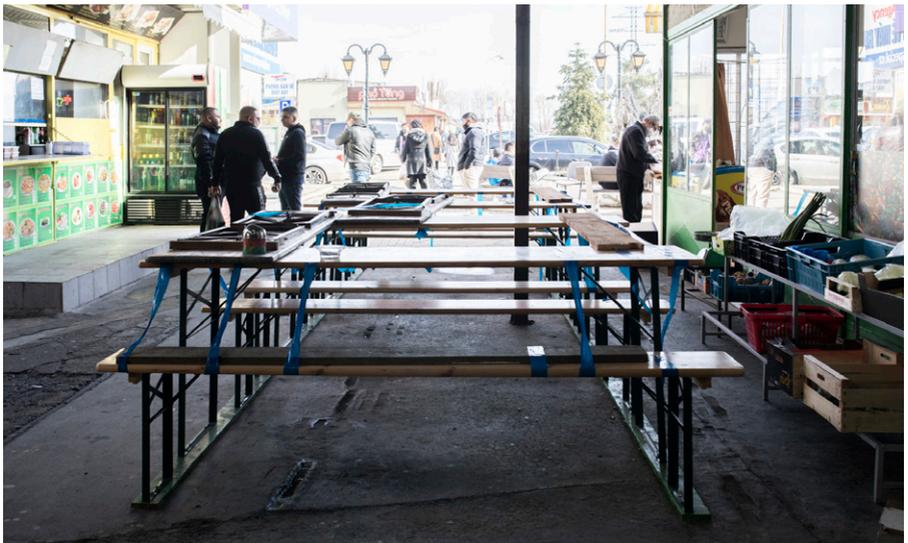


Figure 6. The wooden benches chosen for the case observations. Photo: Quynh Nguyen, 2020.

For my case study, I chose the public rest area in front of a small grocery store run by a Vietnamese couple in their early sixties, Mr. and Mrs. Tran (see Figures 5 and 6). The Trans previously lived in a different city in the Czech Republic and only moved to Prague and opened their grocery store a few years ago. People outside the Sapa area frequently stop at their store to ask for direction or guidance to their destinations, usually a restaurant serving the specific dish they want to try out. When I met Mr. Tran for the first time, I asked him to recommend where to get *bun bo hue* (“spicy Vietnamese noodle soup”), a signature dish from the central region of Vietnam. From this initial topic of conversation, I established a close connection with Mr. and Mrs. Tran as I became a regular visitor to their grocery store.

The Social Construction of the Resting Space through Socialization

Memories, heritage, and mediation

Compared to standard storefronts without self-made rest areas, people are more likely to stop by or pause their walking at resting spaces to check if someone they know is sitting on the benches to have a quick chat. The arrangement of benches, chairs, and table signifies a designated area for socialization between established connections. While the storefronts are a more fragile space for communication because of the flow of customers, the physicality of the self-made resting space allows for more concrete and prolonged off-work interactions. According to Setha M. Low’s theoretical framework of “spatializing culture”, “social construction of space and place includes the transformations and contestations that occur through people’ social interactions, memories, feelings, imaginings, and daily uses [...] These are made into places, scenes and actions that convey particular meanings” (2016, 68). Thus, I proceeded to analyze how socializing interactions happening at this leisure site reveal memories, heritage, and mediation of cultures embedded in the social construction process of this space.

In one of the recorded dialogues happening there, I took note of the exchange between an acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Tran, who dropped by the bench area to ask for advice regarding preparations for a traditional Vietnamese ceremony for her new house before moving in. The ceremony is usually done with a table of offerings to the Tho Dia (“Land God”), usually including specific types of fruits, salt, water, rice, and joss papers. As a common practice of a Vietnamese folk religion, the ceremony acts as a gesture of good faith and

respect to the spirits inhabiting the new land to not disturb the house's new tenants. The observed exchange happened between a woman in her mid-thirties and the Trans, who were in their sixties. It is thus possible that older generations of Vietnamese living in Sapa are more likely to become essential resources for the younger ones to learn about necessary preparations for religious rituals often done in different stages of one's life. Consequently, the social construction of the resting space opens up a place where such exchanges of cultural heritage are possible. The Tho Dia ceremony is only one of the many examples in which community members seek each other's help when buying materials for traditional festivals which belong to Vietnamese's ethnic folk religion. The socialization happening at these leisure areas serves as purposeful preservation of Vietnamese intangible heritage such as traditional customs and ethnic festival celebrations when people remind each other of important dates and necessary preparations. By embedding topics of cultural and ethnic worshipping practices into daily communication, the community members ensure the continuation of these practices and traditions. In this instance, the resting space has become a place where cultural knowledge is maintained and passed down to younger immigrants.

Furthermore, through exchanging intimate details in this space about our personal histories and memories rooted in Vietnam, I gradually grew closer to Mr. and Mrs. Tran. The couple would accept my offer to help Mrs. Tran clean the mung beans that she grew to get them ready for selling. When we were sitting on stools behind the shop counter and cutting the ends off the mung beans, Mrs. Tran would tell me about her daughter and her relatives back at home. She would talk about one of her daughters who decided to settle in Vietnam instead of joining her here as one of the last immediate familial connections she had there. In exchange, I would tell her about my family and my hometown in Vietnam. As we discussed our remaining connections to our homeland while being in the Czech Republic, we created a stronger foundation for our relationship to become more than just casual acquaintances. The shared ethnicity helped at the beginning of our interactions to accelerate our getting to know each other. However, after the interaction above, we were able to more precisely locate each other geographically and culturally in Vietnam. As a result, The Trans became comfortable enough to invite me to join their lunch break meals. Thus, I would imagine that for new friendships and relationships to form between Vietnamese community members in Sapa, this relay of cultural memories and heritage outside of work time at these resting spaces is essential.

Through these two instances of interactions happening at the benches, I show how the socialization among first-generation immigrants in Sapa transformed the physical resting space into a social place where Vietnamese immigrants connect on a deeper level through communicating personal memories, personal histories, and cultural knowledge. Taking a phenomenological and affective approach to analyze the social construction of this space, we see that the daily conversations carry another layer of meanings, indicating a constant transferring back and forth of information and narratives rooted in Vietnam among these community members in Sapa. Sharing rituals and stories from back home during break time becomes a strategy to strengthen their bonds.

Once I see the resting space as embodied by meaningful personal and cultural interactions and conversations, I could also identify trans-national spatial flows linked with its social construction. Outside of interactions with the Trans, whenever I had a conversation with another Vietnamese working in Sapa for the first time, I would get asked where specifically I came from back in Vietnam. It is almost as if my hometown acted as a frame for others to imagine my journey from Vietnam to the Czech Republic and make sense of my presence here. This necessity of locating one's origin in Vietnam as part of forming new relationships is something more often noted in conversations among first-generation Vietnamese immigrants. For first-generation Vietnamese, the resting space has become a kind of "symbolic anchor" for their community to preserve connections and memories of homeland through informal, daily socialization situated in Czech lands (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Low (2016, 79) regards this strategy of constructing homeland as imagined places as being a "part of a politics of memory". Sustaining proximity to cultural traditions and shared histories helps make up for the physical distance to one's originating country.

At the same time, the resting space also communicates specific mediation between cultures during the place-making processes. As I spent time hanging out at the benches, I noticed the nuances in people's use of language there. Even though community members in Sapa converse with each other in fluent Vietnamese, they would use the Czech salutation *ahoj* ("hello" or "goodbye") whenever they pass by their friends or acquaintances. The adoption of the Czech greeting word is influenced by regularly using it to greet and converse with Czech customers daily during work. Occasionally, I also noticed friendly interactions and short conversations in Czech between the Trans and a Czech worker who often rested at the bench during lunchtime. So, this specific merging of languages can reflect the Vietnamese immigrants' readiness to interact

with Czech acquaintances. The simple and accessible form of this Czech word also makes it more easily adaptable for first-generation Vietnamese immigrants working in Sapa whose command of Czech can be more elementary.

In Low's discussion of the social construction of space, she states that "power relations always underlie the social construction of space" (2016, 69). Therefore, the spatial realities created from symbolic interactions between individuals at a specific site could communicate fundamental dynamics of culture (Richardson 1982; Low 2016). Here, the adaptation of the Czech word to greet other Vietnamese instead of using Vietnamese salutation to greet Czechs and Vietnamese reveals the power relation between the two cultures at play during the social construction of resting places. On the one hand, it shows the immigrants' efforts to integrate into Czech society through language. On the other, it illustrates the conscious decision to utilize Czech greetings also to further increase familiarity within the Vietnamese community through daily salutations. A habit formed primarily in the work sphere is then appropriated to be used during socialization among community members at the resting benches. By repeating encounters and saying *ahoj* to each other when passing by the benches near the Tran's store, mutual recognition is improved (Goffman 1963).² Therefore, the resting area becomes a place for Vietnamese immigrants to connect through an informal exchange of memories and heritage during break time and an intermediary place where the intersection of Vietnamese-Czech cultures can happen.

Expansion of social networks through an appropriation of the working space

The resting space is also a significant area where relationships between first-generation Vietnamese in Sapa can overlap and expand. As I observed how one's social network transformed at this site, I paid attention to the critical role the socially constructed space plays in the social lives of first-generation Vietnamese immigrants in Sapa. Within their socialized circle, Mr. and Mrs. Tran interact most frequently with Ms. Thu, who has been a resident at Sapa even longer than the couple. She is the owner of a clothing and accessory store in the alley right next to the Tran's store. Because of the proximity to each other and their close relationship, which has developed over time, during break hours, the three of

² Though not as prevalent, there are instances I observed where Vietnamese community members in SAPA also used Czech swear words such as *Ty vole* ("Damn it") during communication to express frustration or anger. However, this habit is more common for younger generations of Vietnamese working there. The second generation of Vietnamese usually don't work in SAPA. However, when they do visit SAPA, they would talk to each other in fluent Czech instead of Vietnamese.

them, occasionally joined by other people, often share their lunch. After getting to know each other for quite some time, I was also often invited to share a meal with Mr. and Mrs. Tran. One time, Mrs. Tran called out to me when I was sitting by the bench: “Stinky Duck [*vit hoi*], do you want to eat some blood sausage porridge I made?” (personal communication, 22 July 2020). Name-calling is an old custom in Vietnamese tradition, which is more prevalent in the older generation. When people gave birth to children, within the first 100 days of the babies’ lives, the parents or grandparents would call them undesirable names so bad spirits would be deterred from taking them away.

When Mrs. Tran called me out by this name, I was caught off guard. A nickname as such is usually only given within familial, close social circles. Furthermore, when I first got in contact with the Trans, it was Mr. Tran who readily started a conversation with me. Mrs. Tran was more reserved and hesitant until we started sharing our personal histories. I took the endearing nickname “Stinky Duck” given to me as a sign of acceptance and acknowledgement into their social circle centring on the resting bench area. At the beginning of the fieldwork process, I only had Mr. and Mrs. Tran as casual acquaintances due to my frequent visits to the benches next to their store. However, by the end of these field trips, I had found myself within a loose network of socialization circulating this rest area. Not only did I recognize other frequent visitors to the place, but I was also informally introduced to them by Mr. and Mrs. Tran during the times we shared meals.

In this context, the name-calling stands for the reintroduction of my own social identity within their social circle. From a Vietnamese visiting Sapa, I then became a member of the Vietnamese immigrant community in Sapa. There seems to be this distinction between one’s fleeting presence versus one’s established position as part of the social life here. The forging of ties happening at the resting space becomes a crucial facilitator for this transition. The instance of name-calling further indicates that close relationships among community members working in Sapa can take on familial meanings. In some cases, the Vietnamese people here view each other as members of an imagined extended family of Vietnamese immigrants in the host country. The Vietnamese ancient practice of giving undesirable nicknames, which is originally only reserved for newborn babies, has been mediated and transformed to become also an expression of acceptance and openness toward new and younger members of the community in Sapa.

By assembling used furniture to carve out a space for socialization within the working areas, the residents of Sapa market centre have created their own opportunities to enrich their social lives during break time. I use Goffman’s

analysis of the presentation of self in everyday life to interpret how Vietnamese immigrants utilize the rest areas as their “backstage” for off-work social interactions. According to Goffman’s discussion of social construction of self (1963), the social self is present “in interaction with others, through ‘gatherings’ (incidents in which individuals are present, but not necessarily in interaction with each other) and ‘encounters’ (social events with temporary and spacious borders, where interaction is likely to occur)” (Henriksen and Tjora 2013). Such interactions are therefore closely connected to both social and physical structures. The purposeful arrangements of furniture in Sapa resting areas acts as signifiers for potential “gathering” opportunities, since it offers an established, physical space especially for socialization among acquaintances. Additionally, the leisure areas are where the members of the Vietnamese Czech community can keep a comfortable distance from their public identity as merchants and service providers. During their “encounters”, the rest area creates a temporary separation from work, both in time and space. In other words, during break times, the people leave the front stage of working life to interact with each other as members of the Vietnamese immigrant community in Sapa.

However, we need to consider the work culture of Vietnamese immigrants working in Sapa and its influence on the formation of their social ties. The resting space is constructed not only to provide a kind of backstage from work but also to create and maintain close friendships among people working in Sapa during these backstage interactions. In Sapa, migrant merchants would start working at seven in the morning at the earliest and end work at seven or eight o’clock in the evening. Smaller-scale merchants would opt to stay open even during national holidays unless it is required to stay closed by Czech laws. This “hustle” culture is prominent in Sapa as the flow of customers can vary significantly from day to day for some shops. At the same time, one of the main reasons for migration for first-generation Vietnamese immigrants is to seek economic opportunities and stability. As a result, compared to native merchants, migrant merchants in Sapa could have more strained work-life balance experience. The demanding nature of work inadvertently introduces challenges to off-work socialization. At the end of the day, the merchants would often just go straight home to rest for the next day. Once in a while, they would hang out with each other a bit longer after closing their stores to catch up and finish their conversations. Since there is less time for community building activities or having rich social events outside of work, the unofficial and official break times during work become valuable opportunities for strengthening relationships.

With a large part of their day spent at Sapa, the merchants often have their co-workers or neighbouring shop owners as their close friends, such as in the case of the friendship we see between Ms. Thu and the Trans. Their friendship doesn't only exist exclusively in the working space but also bleeds into each other's personal and social lives. While conversing with each other during break time at the benches, Ms. Thu would often ask about Mrs. Tran's nieces, and she even attended her nieces' birthday parties in the past.

This example further shows that the appropriation of working space to make space for socialization is also born out of the need to have a social life despite the consuming work-life at Sapa. For community members of Sapa, their work culture often results in the unavoidable overlapping of the public/work sphere and the personal/leisure sphere. By embedding these resting spaces with intimate and familial exchanges, the migrant merchants in Sapa have opened up the space for social possibilities that allow them to bring personal life outside of work coexisting within their working place. These spatial practices also enable a transition from mere co-worker relationships to deeper friendships that extend beyond the work realms.

Different personal perspectives on social life at Sapa

Mrs. Hoa is one of the connections I gained as part of my own organic social network expansion during the fieldwork in Sapa. The first time I met Mrs. Hoa, I was hanging out at my usual spot on the bench when she joined me. Introducing herself as a newcomer to the Czech Republic, she said she did not know many people yet. "My husband came here first for a job, and he was here for two years before I joined him through the family reunification visa this year", she would tell me. Back at home, she was farming like other people in her regions' countryside. She said: "I've just sold my plots of lands and closed down the rice wholesale business. Then, I could come here to join my family" (personal communication with Mrs. Hoa, included in this section, all took place on 9 August 2020).

When asked about her experience with Prague and the Vietnamese community in Sapa, Mrs. Hoa could not avoid making comparisons to her previous life in Vietnam. "It was quite sad here when I first arrived", Mrs. Hoa complained. "Everyone here just works all day long until late evening and then goes home to sleep". It was not like this in the countryside village of Northern Vietnam, where she was from. In her hometown, the communal social activities are much more varied and exciting. "We would break our backs working so hard out on the

fields under such intense heat, but when evening comes, everyone gathers and has fun, you know?” According to Mrs. Hoa, her fellow villagers would usually hang out in the early evening at the park. Some would be playing badminton. Someone would always bring a portable radio, and the middle-aged countrymen would dance to the music under the night sky. “Nothing seems to happen here after the workday ends”, she commented. From her perspective as a newcomer, Mrs. Hoa regarded the social life of the community in Sapa ethnoburb as lacking compared to that of the previous community she lived among.

In fact, to Mrs. Hoa, the lack of explicit post-work daily social activities that she noticed further reflected the life of Vietnamese immigrants in Sapa. When asked about the reasons behind many Vietnamese countryside residents’ decision to find a new life in Czech lands, Mrs. Hoa contemplated: “If you worked hard here, you would be able to save a good amount of money for yourself and your family. With the same kinds of jobs like those available in Sapa, most people back in Vietnam would spend their salary on entertainment and enjoying themselves and end up with not much savings left”. In both her remarks about life in Vietnam and Prague, specifically Sapa, I found a correlation between the social life differences and economic opportunities among the first-generation Vietnamese in Czech Republic. Considering the purpose of finding personal economic development as the reason for immigration, the decrease in habitual social life in host societies becomes one of the sacrifices immigrants would make to achieve their goals when immigrating into the Czech Republic.

Mrs. Hoa admitted that she often went to Sapa and sat at the benches to hang out and talk with people. Since she was still waiting for her husband to help find her a job in Sapa, she got bored just spending time at home. Everyone else was at the market centre working. As someone who had yet to start work, she was unable to form new relationships with other community members in the area easily unless she went to Sapa and interacted with them during their rest times. The bench area was also where Mrs. Hoa befriended Mr. and Mrs. Tran after sustained interactions over time. Furthermore, through this prolonged presence at the space, Mrs. Hoa was able to have an overview of how social life functions and operates in Sapa. Her observation again highlighted the off-work socialization as an essential symbolic resource but often taken away from community members by the demanding work schedules at Sapa. By recognizing the different forms of socialization within the Vietnamese community here, Mrs. Hoa gradually made sense of the new place and adjusted to the new lifestyle and social rhythms there. The narrative analyzed through in-depth interviews

with Mrs. Hoa revealed the ways in which established social traditions or socialization strategies acquired in their home countries gradually change and transform in new transnational spaces for the newly arrived Vietnamese immigrants like her.

Online Leisure Areas: Online Socialization and Interactions among Vietnamese Immigrants

As a new immigrant, one way of getting quick connections with an established Vietnamese community in Prague is through visiting Sapa. The other way can be done online. When entering straightforward Vietnamese search terms in the Facebook search bar, one can easily identify several major active Facebook groups serving different purposes that are run by Vietnamese Czech immigrants, each with thousands of members to connect with: Hom nay an gi – Ngay mai an gi – tai Sec (What to eat today – What to eat tomorrow – in the Czech Republic) as a group for promoting and reviewing food and restaurants in the Czech Republic, Hiep Hoi Potraviny Cz (Association of Potraviny Cz) as a news source and connecting point for the majority of Vietnamese merchants across the country, Cho Sapa Praha (Sapa Market Praha) as a specific group for the Vietnamese community in the Sapa ethnoburb. Daily, these Facebook groups get updated very frequently. In the case of the Facebook group Hiep Hoi Potraviny Cz (Association of Potraviny Cz), which currently has 54,000 members, the average number of posts per day can total nearly 100 posts. The active participation in such Facebook groups, which use Vietnamese as the primary language of communication, is especially prevalent among the first generation of Vietnamese in the Czech Republic. The majority of them utilize the space to promote and do online business targeting other Vietnamese-speaking members. Although any Vietnamese can join any of the groups listed above, as the membership is not exclusive, the content of the more specifically named groups would need to comply to those groups' rules. For example, the posts in Cho Sapa Praha should only be related to Sapa market centre or to sales and advertisements of stores operating in Sapa area. These Facebook groups not only allow for larger-scale communication between different Vietnamese communities in the Czech Republic, but they also have more specific categorizations suitable for one's needs.

Digital technologies and media (and the services and activities that people can do with them) are interdependent with the infrastructures of everyday life. Using digital ethnography on social media platforms allows me to analyze the

digital space in relation to physical environments. Given the concentrated use of social media among the general Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic as one of the main means of communication and social interaction among them, the online activities and interactions of the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants in Sapa count as important forms of socialization during and after work. Thus, I apply Low's framework of spatializing culture to study these Facebook groups as alternative, digital "resting" spaces. Even though these spaces also host certain business activities, I am only interested in analyzing their purpose as leisure/resting spaces for the Vietnamese immigrants. Therefore, I only focus on those members' interactions that are related to leisure and socialization, and not business or work. The field notes taken while participating in the Facebook groups and studying how daily routines or interactions among the members can reveal insights that direct, individual interviews and observations cannot uncover. This insight emphasizes how online spaces function as another essential part of the social lives of first-generation Vietnamese people outside and during their traditional working hours. As a result, interaction in this digital resting space also needs documentation and analysis.

Socioscape and mediascape of Vietnamese-Czech Facebook groups

When studying the purposes and functions of the major Facebook groups for the Vietnamese transnational community in the Czech Republic, and in Sapa specifically, to some extent, the online space operates similarly to that of the physical space: a combination of business operations and more informal, casual non-business-related interactions that occur side by side. Businesses in Facebook groups are often taken up by female members who dominate the sales of homemade products and traditional medicines sourced from natural herbs. The scale of such businesses is usually not large since they are often either home run businesses or convenient extensions of the physical stores in Sapa (see Figure 8). Most Facebook groups allow advertising posts; therefore, a large part of the group is inundated with such posts. The advertising posts serve to remind the Facebook members of the services and products of the business while also sharing updates of new offers or informing about operational changes. Usually, for advertising posts that appear daily in the group, there is little to no interaction with them; this observation accounts for only public and direct engagement with the posts, since I was not able to track whether personal messages were also sent to the seller's inbox nor I was able to observe the number of people who viewed the posts.

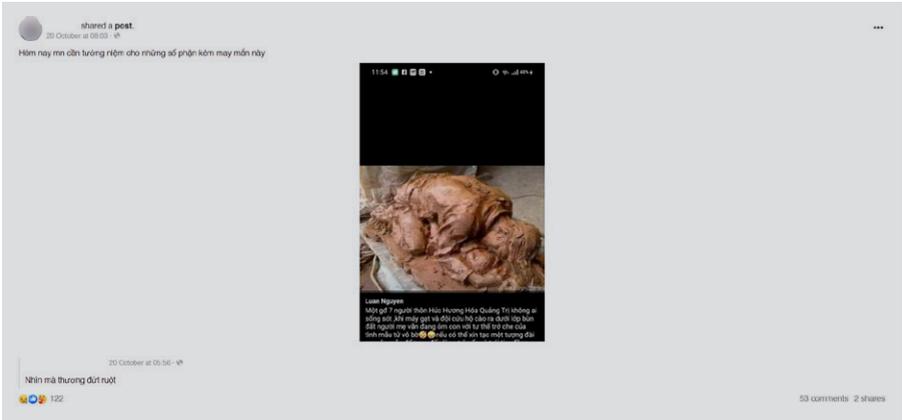


Figure 7. A shared post in the group Cho Sapa tai Sec (Sapa Market in the Czech Republic) commemorating the lives lost during the flood season in Central Vietnam (Le 2020). These informative posts across multiple Facebook groups run by Vietnamese immigrants in the Czech Republic help them keep in touch with contemporary situations or updates back in Vietnam.

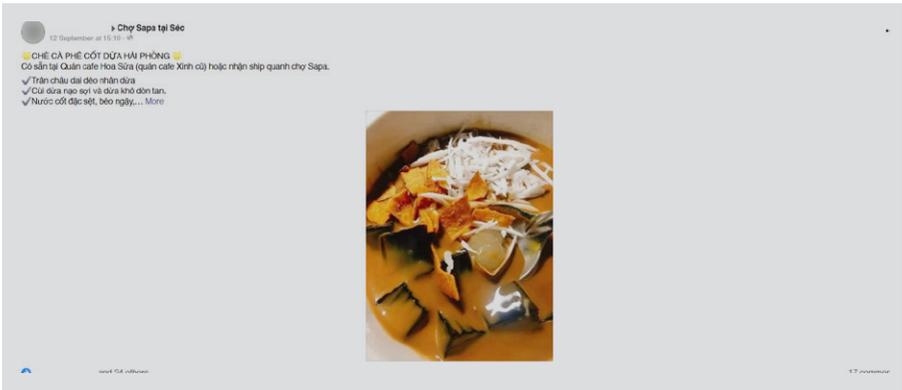


Figure 8. An advertisement post in the Facebook group Cho Sapa tai Sec (Sapa Market in the Czech Republic) from a food business owner for traditional sweet desserts from Hai Phong province, Vietnam (Hoa Sua Praha 2020). The dessert is available at a physical Sapa café called Hoa Sua (Milkwood Pine Flower) but can also be ordered for take-away by Vietnamese merchants working at Sapa market.

Besides business-related posts, the rest of the posts on these Facebook groups provide content that supports the socialization and connections within the Czech Vietnamese community. On the one hand, these groups often act as information centres where people get updated with daily news in Vietnamese (see Figure 7) or where they go to ask for help and advice from the larger community. On the other hand, the groups also provide alternative forms of entertainment for the community. For entertainment, throughout the day, multiple groups and individuals would share on these social media Livestream videos of themselves singing and performing music. These music performances can vary between solo singing shows and group acts. The majority of them are made by amateur performers in the karaoke style.

The settings for these kinds of mini shows are not very complicated. One would often see one or two singers or performers on the computer screen, with the backdrop of a plain wall in domestic space dotted with lights from a moving disco ball or a small band who would provide live music with their keyboards and guitars in a small, decorated music venue. The music choice is predominantly Vietnamese, catering to the first generation of older Vietnamese immigrants, who are usually uninterested in contemporary international music styles. Vietnamese *bolero* is a particularly popular music genre that singers often Livestream on Facebook groups. This genre is a peculiar Vietnamese version of bolero, often colloquially known as *Nhac Vàng* (“yellow music” or “golden music”), which took its influence from the Hispanic originator during the 1950s and blended it with traditional Southern Vietnam music during the Vietnam War era (Taylor 2000). Bolero songs are romantic, slow, and sad, often used to poetically express themes of love and daily life. The genre reflects the war times and political unrest from the 1950s to 1970s (ibid.). Thus, it is connected more with the upbringing and childhood of the older generations of Vietnamese immigrants out of nostalgia. The music choice is significant as it carries cultural memories of the wartime past. In this popular music genre, there are pieces of oral stories and memories embedded into it which enable for the Vietnamese immigrants to develop a perspective where they can feel they are more than just people who come from “rice paddies” (Nguyen 2018, 177).

The livestreaming of karaoke sessions on Facebook groups illustrates the intersections of the digital and physical resting spaces. As the videos are posted through the day, they act as alternative forms of entertainment for mid-work as well as post-work break time for the merchants. After work, the lack of interactive social activities is this way made up for by engagement in online

entertainment provided by other community members. Perhaps, given the nature of Vietnamese immigrants' working schedules, the activity of performing and watching karaoke videos during the day acts as an alternative to dancing and playing badminton in the park that Mrs. Hoa missed from Vietnam. At the same time, the content of these posts also represents the reliving of the times in Vietnam by way of traditional music genres.

Karaoke singing holds an important role for the Asian community, both at home and overseas, such as the Asian-American community in Deborah Wong and Mai Elliot's study of Asian American popular music (1988). For Asian American immigrants, karaoke is a great social ritual that "allows anyone to be a star for a few moments, and it can negotiate the potential wasteland between being Asian and being Asian American" (Wong and Elliot 1988, 156). However, for different communities, karaoke can hold profoundly different meanings and functions (*ibid.*, 164). In the context of Vietnamese immigrants in the Czech Republic, online amateur karaoke performances of Vietnamese popular music of the past can also act as a substitute for their offline counterparts (*i.e.*, live performances), which are a common socialization strategy during social gatherings in Vietnam, something that is not so feasible given the work culture of immigrants in Czech Republic. Here, the construction of a digital resting space on Facebook reflects again the need for a social life outside of work and for maintaining ethnic identity through various content originating from Vietnam. Furthermore, by way of performing and listening to the narratives embedded in the songs, Vietnamese migrants "can be transported back to an imagined Vietnam that no longer exists, or they can project themselves into uniquely immigrant versions" of the successful migration stories from the host country (*ibid.*, 164). Vietnamese karaoke performance becomes a travel story told from a first-person perspective in which both the listeners and the performers temporarily escape from reality of hardworking migrants and engage in nostalgia for an imagined homeland or temporarily experience an imagined, ideal present.

Norms and stigmas

While employing critical discourse analysis, the close study of texts on the Facebook group, just like verbal social interaction in the case of the physical rest areas, includes examining written materials from both micro levels of word choices and macro levels of the overall structure and content (Kress and Hodge 1979; Fowler 1991; Fairclough 2000). Among the interactions occurring online in the chosen Facebook groups, sexual unfaithfulness is deemed a very sensitive

matter whenever it occurs and is reported in the groups, which happens rather often. It is also among the posts with the highest engagement rates, averaging in 100–200 comments per post. As a witness and reader of these posts during my fieldwork, I was able to observe specific patterns. The accusation posts included both textual explanations and digital media evidence ranging from screenshots of messages, video recordings, and voice recordings. The posting person would use the cheating couple's personal Facebook profile photos without blurring out their faces.

To the online community members, the reaction to these posts was that infidelity is unacceptable, especially if a person already has children with the partner they cheated on. One post I collected during digital fieldwork in the group Cho Sapa tai Sec (Sapa Market in the Czech Republic) brought up the case of a husband taking out collateral mortgages to finance his wife's immigration process to the Czech Republic. He later found out that she had left him and their two children for another man she had met in her new country. Reading through the comments, I noticed the consensus was against the cheating woman. "This woman is a hussy [*ranh ma*]", one commented, "acting as if she did not have a husband or any children" ("Cai Con Nay Gian ..." 2020). "Can any sisters share with me this girl's Facebook?" another inquired, and her request was met with an immediate screenshot image of the cheating woman's personal Facebook profile ("Co Chi Nao Chia ..." 2020). Another commenter advised, "I recommend that you do not regret leaving night moths [*buom dem*] like this one; they do not belong to the human category. If you are honest and kind, there are nice women out there in the world for you. Find a better mother for your two kids. I wish the three of you great health and peace. Live calmly. Consequences will come to those who do not appreciate what they had" ("Thoi Bo Di Tiec ..." 2020). The comment gathered six thumbs-ups in agreement. In this instance, the commenter had used an analogy of a creature active at night, comparing it to the sneaky cheating woman. In the Vietnamese language, this analogy is commonly used with a negative connotation to refer to call girls who are active at night on the streets, and waving at male passers-by to offer sexual services.

As it is necessary for ethnographic data to be interpreted against the background of a societal context, I have located the patterns of discourse found in these recorded texts within a wider social context to see the relationship with the existing Vietnamese Czech immigrant social structures (Burawoy et al. 2000). Infidelity is a sensitive issue and guarantees large engagement from the online community in the Vietnamese immigrant Facebook group because it closely

relates to immigration patterns and work cultures among the whole Vietnamese immigrant community. In instances of infidelity occurring within the Sapa ethnoburb community, a person was often cheated on during the separation period of the couple. Within the Vietnamese immigrant community, it is not rare, initially, during the immigration process, for a family to be separated for a certain time.

In many families, the husband is the first to immigrate to the Czech Republic to work, earn money, and obtain a stable work visa before his wife and children can join him later from Vietnam on a family reunion visa. Thus, the separation time can contribute to the possibility of infidelity among men and women in the Vietnamese immigrant community in the Czech Republic. The issue is especially sensitive for women, as they are more often on the receiving end of unfaithfulness. With this specific Vietnamese immigration pattern, an imbalanced gender power dynamic exists between the two partners of a marriage. The person who immigrates first to the Czech Republic has the time and resources to establish themselves socially and economically in the Vietnamese immigrant community. Relationships and connections become a soft power that one has over the other partner still residing in Vietnam. When the other partner arrives in the Czech Republic, they would have to rely on the one with connections in the Czech Republic to help them find jobs and settle into their new life. Such a process would require a significant amount of trust between the two. Not only that, just as with Mrs. Hoa's comment about the motivations for immigration (see above), many Vietnamese from smaller provinces work hard toward successful immigration in search of economic opportunities and personal stability. In this context, the initial migratory separation not only presents a sacrifice, but it also works as an investment in the future of the family. Consequently, when cheating happens, the damage can be more remarkable as it affects the family structure that one strives to maintain.

Hung Cam Thai's extensive study of international marriages among the Vietnamese diaspora community in the United States is relevant to this discussion about gender relations, marriage, and migration (2008). As he analyzed unions between Vietnamese men living in the United States and the Vietnamese women living in Vietnam who marry them, he anticipated that once the women unite with their husbands through migration, "all of them will proceed with their marital life according to the politics of kinship, familial piety, and obligations, regardless of their geographical identity or class status" (ibid., 144). He realized in this regard that "transnational mobilities can simultaneously challenge as well

as reinforce patriarchy” (ibid., 145). The women could find themselves faced with different cultural patterns in the new host country, but they would still be burdened by the Vietnamese culture and tradition where “divorce is stigmatized and where saving face is a sacred activity” (ibid., 145). However, it is important to distinguish the differences in migration patterns between Thai’s case studies and the ones observed within the Vietnamese diaspora in the Czech Republic. The men who migrated to the Czech Republic already came from established marriages and would wait for the rest of their families to join them after a few years. Nevertheless, several factors that Thai identifies in his study, such as “familial surveillance across transnational social fields”, or judgements from the Vietnamese community overseas, and their pressures against divorce, could be helpful for future studies regarding the connection between marriage, infidelity, and gender relations in the context of the Vietnamese immigrant family models in the Czech Republic.

The scene and engagement with the types of social media posts about infidelity among Vietnamese people in the Czech Republic resemble an online public trial in which the accused is shamed and has their identity publicized to others. Through observing the consistent presentation of posts exposing infidelity and the disapproving online public engagement, I was able to identify sexual faithfulness or fidelity as an upheld value and a powerful norm established within the Czech Vietnamese community. A person needs to adhere to this acceptable group conduct, and those who go against the expected norm would suffer from informal social sanction. The social sanction for violating such norms includes involuntary public exposure of personal information and online public shaming. In some instances, online exposure can result in follow-up video recordings of confrontation in the physical world posted to the group. Here, the digital space resting area becomes a place where new norms and stigmas are established and sustained through online interaction among first-generation Vietnamese immigrants. Moreover, the consequences and sanctions of such stigmas do not play out exclusively online but also inform and influence actions happening in physical spaces.

The digital resting space as an extension of the physical resting space

While the case study of social relations centring on the benches in Sapa shows how these interactions play out within personal social networks, the Facebook group’s observations reveal how similar kinds of social exchanges function within a more extensive online network of Vietnamese immigrants

in Sapa and the Czech Republic in general. When reviewing the ethnography of internet users, researchers often discuss questions regarding the strength of binding commitments made in online settings compared to offline settings. Some researchers view the internet as a decentered and unlocalized “network of networks” (Hannerz 1996). However, when combining the data from the online ethnographic work with the data I collected in the context of offline fieldwork, I identified the connection between online social activities and physical social activities as being parts of a larger social whole (Miller and Slate 2000). Online, the sense of community is not only preserved but also further extended. I view the internet community existing in the Czech Vietnamese Facebook groups as an extension of the rest areas I observed physically in Sapa. It appears that the interactions between community members online help fill the gap left by the lack of larger-scale physical socialization after work in Sapa (Kozinets 2010, 22, 23). There is a flow of information going from the physical world to the digital world and back. After the community gets informed of current events in the physical space through the Facebook group posts, they would discuss and form opinions about it online and offline, including in Sapa’s rest areas. Similarly, exposing posts online can have direct consequences in the relationships between certain members in the community and on other people’s perception of them. In the digital world, community building and ethnic identity construction also go hand in hand: “unique characteristics of communities of immigrants – such as shared histories, cultural values, experiences, common country of origin, and offline interaction – help shape the nature and dynamics of their interactions online” (Navarrete 2006).

Active online communities, such as the Facebook groups I observed and participated in, have emerged increasingly concentrated across many platforms and for every conceivable type of community of people to find their “own” (Goffman 1963). Such communities act as safe spaces and closed environments to facilitate important collective identity work (Creek and Dunn 2015). It can be argued that membership of both the physical place of Sapa and the online space of the Vietnamese immigrant community contributes to the on-going process of “creating new identities through the creative appropriation of parts of each contradictory identity” (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004; Creek 2013). While playing the role of merchants in Sapa, these same people are also able to construct their social identity as members of the Vietnamese community in Czech Republic by interacting and socializing with each other during and after work hours.

Because the time span for digital ethnography work is limited, the observations mainly serve to offer a slice of daily life interaction on Facebook among Sapa ethnoburb community members specifically, and among larger Vietnamese Czech community in general. As such, the findings are also not to be overgeneralized but rather regarded as an initial critical insight into the implications of online resting spaces' social constructions through off-work socializing activities happening there. Nevertheless, applying the approach helped me further expand on established theory since it allowed me to investigate and analyze another resting space essential to Vietnamese immigrant merchants' social lives. Furthermore, the photographic documentation of their daily life interactions with physical space combined with observations of their online activities allow me to give a diaristic view of what a full day of a Vietnamese community member in Sapa looks like. Through this view, I was able to see how cultural memories and routines took place and which roles they played in the social construction of physical and digital spaces.

Conclusion

Through observing and analyzing online and offline socializations happening outside of work, I identify the resting space as a crucial site for identity construction and community building for first-generation Vietnamese immigrants in Sapa. On the one hand, the physical construction of the resting spaces in Sapa creates temporary backstage areas away from one's work life. On the other, the data shows that community members also connect and uphold a sense of ethnic identity in these resting spaces through exchanging personal memories and cultural practices. Such interactions further help one's geographic transition from Vietnam to become a part of the immigrant community in the Czech Republic. Especially for the new immigrants in the Czech Republic and to the Sapa community, the rest areas provide opportunities to form new friendships via routinized interactions.

For the immigrant community in Sapa, work takes up large parts of social life. Thus, the physical and social construction of resting areas there is born out of the need to carve out space for one's social life when work life become all-consuming. Traditional off-work socialization or clear separation between work and personal space become privileged resources that are not as accessible among the immigrant community due to the nature of their work and their social situation in general. As a result, relationships formed at Sapa's resting spaces

appropriated from working areas take on meanings that are more intimate and familial than casual.

The shift in focus to the online mediascape and socioscape of Sapa opens up a potential direction of ethnographic work that views online Facebook groups as alternative digital leisure areas for immigrant communities. The Facebook groups of Vietnamese Czech immigrants in Sapa, among others, act as an extension to their physical spaces. These social media host a mix of both business and a more casual and intimate level of interactions among the community members. The field notes gathered from online interactions on social media demonstrate how Vietnamese immigrants in the Czech Republic share cultural values and nostalgia for homeland through music performances in traditional Vietnamese genres or by posting news updates from Vietnam. The online space is also where larger-scale social interactions happen, contributing to the formation and preservation of certain cultural, gender norms, and social stigmas within the immigrant community that are restricting to some of its members.

The research offers an exploratory look at Vietnamese Czech immigrant socializations within Sapa ethnoburbs outside of the working sphere by focusing on the resting space as a socially constructed site and embedded with meanings. However, the data and analysis should not represent how the other ethnoburbs in other parts of the Czech Republic, or internationally, behave. The case study thus focuses more on the social organization aspect of this specific community, especially in terms of the dynamics of its social life rather than seeing it as something static and fixed (Firth 1951). Moreover, the research offers another perspective to the discussions and representations of Sapa in the context of cultural spatialization while highlighting the importance of online socialization for the immigrant community (Li 2012).

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