

RETURN MIGRATION OF VIETNAMESE FROM CAMBODIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Over several decades, a combination of historical, economic, and political factors have influenced the multifaceted phenomenon of Vietnamese return migration from Cambodia. This article examines the return migration of Vietnamese from a historical perspective with document and contextual analysis, revealing a broader picture of the socio-economic and political dynamics in Cambodia and the historical relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam. Before the 1990s, return migration was significantly influenced by colonial-era migration policies and pervasive anti-Vietnamese sentiments. These factors led to violent repression and forced evictions under regimes such as Lon Nol and the Khmer Rouge, profoundly impacting the Vietnamese community in Cambodia. In contrast, administrative governance and economic factors have become the key determinants of Vietnamese return migration in the contemporary period. Understanding the underlying causes and mechanisms that create the situation for Vietnamese in Cambodia and their return is crucial, serving as a basis for addressing their current challenges and promoting their social integration in both countries.

Keywords: Campuchia, Khmer, migration, return migration, Vietnamese Cambodians

1. Introduction

Return migration often focuses on individual voluntary decisions, such as retirement, returning to homeland, reconnecting with cultural roots (Kunuroglu et al., 2016), or policies to attract talent and brain from the homeland and the economic impacts of returnees on the local economy. However, the return of Vietnamese from Cambodia is not solely driven by economic factors or personal voluntary choices. In reality, the migration pattern between Vietnam and Cambodia for the Vietnamese is much more complex, involving historical impacts and influences from economic, political, and diplomatic factors, as well as the attitudes of Cambodians, particularly the Cambodian elites, towards the Vietnamese.

Historically, the presence of the Vietnamese communities in Cambodia and the Khmer communities in Vietnam are social entities formed through a long historical process. Vietnam recognizes the Khmer as members and one of ethnic groups within Vietnam, granting them citizenship and nationality rights, and they are included in Vietnam's general socio-economic development policies and also minority ethnic policies. Vietnam's approach is consistent with the principles set out in the international human rights framework, emphasizing the importance of inclusive policies for the socio-economic integration of ethnic minority groups (United Nations, 1948; OHCHR, 2015). However, the Vietnamese communities in Cambodia, despite having a long history of migration and settlement, they have been still considered foreigners in the "Khmer" world by the Cambodia's state, constitution, and ethnic classification (Ehrentraut, 2014). For Vietnamese returning from Cambodia, the common

situation they face is the problem of nationality and citizenship rights (Anh et al., 2024; Amber, 2006). The difficulties in accessing citizenship - nationality have made it difficult for them to access social services, livelihoods, and employment in their homeland.

Regarding immigration history, the organized and significant migration of Vietnamese to Cambodia took place during the French colonial period. To effectively exploit the Cambodia colony, the French colonial authorities utilized manpower from Vietnam, who were considered more diligent, industrious, and skilled than Cambodians, encouraging a wave of Vietnamese migration to Cambodia. This migration significantly altered Cambodia's demographic and socio-economic landscape, leading to the formation of Vietnamese communities, especially in urban centers like Phnom Penh. The preferential treatment and favoritism shown by the colonial authorities towards the Vietnamese led to anti-Vietnamese sentiment among Cambodians. The Cambodian elites, influenced by nationalism that included ethnic identity, sovereignty, and resistance to external influences, created political discourses in forums, campaigns, media, and academia that left a legacies of long-standing ethnic conflict. Consequently, after gaining independence, successive Cambodian governments continued to exclude Vietnamese from citizenship rights, nationality granting, and ethnic classification. During periods of political turmoil, such as the Lon Nol regime and the Khmer Rouge era, the Vietnamese faced severe repression, including violent purges and forced deportations. Through extreme policies, the Khmer Rouge regime caused the Cambodian economy to collapse and killed civilians, including Vietnamese. With the assistance of Vietnamese military, Cambodia was liberated from the Khmer Rouge regime, leading to the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). During this time, many Vietnamese returned to Cambodia. Majority of these returnees were previously settled Vietnamese who returned to their homes and ancestral graves that they had been forced to leave during extreme political periods. This return included new Vietnamese migrants seeking new opportunities during Vietnam's difficult period of agricultural collectivization. They sought to rebuild their lives in Cambodia, contributing to this country's reconstruction after the Khmer Rouge era.

The PRK period witnessed significant Vietnamese influence in Cambodian politics and society, which fueled anti-Vietnamese sentiment among some political parties and a segment of the Cambodian population. The situation of the Vietnamese has worsened in the changing economic-political landscape in Cambodia since 1993. They became targets and political agendas for political parties in political campaigns. They were targeted for killing by remnants of the Khmer Rouge and were victims of corruption, lacking citizenship and nationality, which made it difficult for them to access basic social services, employment, property, and social security. The contemporary political context in Cambodia exacerbates the statelessness, lack of identification documents, and nationality of the Vietnamese, leaving them without opportunities for socio-economic development and safety in a transitioning Cambodia.

The return migration of the Vietnamese is driven by multiple historical causes rooted in economic, political, and social factors rather than merely economic or political reasons. This article presents the historical context through different periods, along with the causes and push and pull factors of Vietnamese migration in Cambodia, spanning a long historical process from the 17th century to the present.

2. Data sources and research methods

Data sources:

Archival records, government reports, and academic articles documenting historical events related to the Vietnamese Cambodian communities are used. These sources provide information on the socio-political dynamics, migration patterns, and policies affecting the Vietnamese Cambodians across different periods. The reports and papers include data on the general socio-demographic characteristics of the Vietnamese Cambodians, such as legal status, housing conditions, livelihoods, employment, and assets. Information is collected from censuses, surveys, and researches conducted by government and non-governmental organizations through their reports.

Research methods:

The document analysis method involves a systematic review of historical records to extract relevant information on Cambodia-Vietnam relations and migration patterns. Document analysis helps identify important events, policies, and socio-political fluctuations that have influenced the lives of Vietnamese Cambodians.

The contextual analysis method considers the broader economic and socio-political contexts in which Vietnamese migration and return migration occur. Contextual analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving these migrations. This includes analyzing the historical context of the colonial period, the regimes of Lon Nol and Pol Pot, and the post-1979 periods.

3. Results

3.1. *The Vietnamese Community in Cambodia (17th Century to 1953)*

The Vietnamese migration southward during the 17th century led to their interaction with the Khmer and access to fertile lands in the southern regions (Amer, 1994b). The Vietnamese chose to settle and live along major waterways such as the Mekong River and Tonle Sap River. This settlement pattern was driven by the desire to access fertile lands and the essential transportation routes provided by the river system. The annual floods created by the Mekong River system deposited alluvium, creating rich arable lands ideal for growing crops, promoting a stable agricultural society. The abundant water resources facilitated irrigation, provided drinking water, fishing opportunities, and met other daily needs, ensuring the survival and development of the surrounding communities. The rivers also served as natural roads, allowing the easy transportation of goods, people, and information. Vietnamese communities migrating and settling in areas such as Kampong Chhnang, Battambang, and various regions along the southwestern border, stem from this settlement pattern. Many fishing villages around Tonle Sap Lake were established during this period (Amer, 1994b). The Nguyen Lords and the Nguyen Dynasty gradually consolidated control over the Mekong Delta, encouraging a steady wave of Vietnamese settlement in these areas (Amer, 1994b; Chandler, 2018, pp. 141-166).

This southward expansion not only reduced Siam's influence over its two neighboring countries: Laos and Cambodia, but also placed Cambodia within the influence between two more powerful neighbors: Siam and Vietnam (Amer, 1994b). Until the mid-19th century, the borders between Vietnam and Cambodia were not clearly demarcated, despite the Nguyen Dynasty's efforts to formalize them through infrastructure projects such as the Vinh Te Canal, located near national border today (Vu Duc Liem, 2016, p. 93). In the perception of the resident, the Vietnam-Cambodia border areas were simply cultural-social spaces, including ethnic groups with different cultural practices (Le Huong, 1970; Shimojo, 2021). The delineation and management of borders between Vietnam and Cambodia became clearer under French rule. The establishment of the Indochina Union by the French in October 1887 marked a significant demographic and ethnic restructuring in the region. This union included Cambodia and three constituent regions of Vietnam, namely Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, along with Laos (added in 1893). The process of delimiting the boundary between Vietnam and Cambodia lasted from 1869 to 1942. This boundary is divided into four parts, determined through 4 different stages. The coastal section, stretching 209 km along the low alluvial plain, was primarily established in 1873 through an agreement between the King of Cambodia and the Governor of Cochinchina. Continuing northeast, the western contiguous portion of present-day Ho Chi Minh City was delineated from 1869 to 1872 and revised in 1914. The third segment, extending north from Rach Cham to the Dak Huyt River, was outlined from 1871 to 1914. The final stretch extended from the Dak Dam River to the confluence of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (see map) (John, 1998). This administrative map of Indochina consolidates the presence of the Vietnamese minority communities in Cambodia and a large ethnic Khmer population in Vietnam.



Figure 1. The map of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

Source: John, R.B.S., 1998. *The Land Boundaries of Indochina: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*. IBRU.

The first colonial census in 1874 recorded 4.452 Vietnamese individuals within a Cambodian population of 746.424. By 1911, the number of Vietnamese immigrants had increased to 79.050 out of a total Cambodian population of 1.360.188. By 1921, this number had increased to 150.000, accounting for 5.8% of the population. In 1951, estimates indicated that the Vietnamese population in Cambodia had grown by 230.000 to 250.000 (Comte, 1976, cited in Amer, 1994b). These figures illustrate a significant increase in the Vietnamese in Cambodia during the French colonial period (Amer, 1994b). The Vietnamese presence was most prominent in Cambodia's urban centers, particularly Phnom Penh, which had 18.990 Vietnamese residents, accounting for 61.51% of the total urban population (in 1921) (Alain, 1974, cited in Goscha, 2009). The Vietnamese in Phnom Penh took on various roles, such as officials, shopkeepers, police officers, and artisans (Chandler, 1993; Chou, 1992; Willmott, 1967). They played a crucial role in the colonial social transformation of Western Indochina. By July 1936, Cambodia's population had reached over 3 million, including 191.000 Vietnamese (Cambodge, cited in Goscha, 2009).

The data show that the Vietnamese population in Cambodia increased significantly due to the policies of the French colonial government. French administrators portrayed the Vietnamese as hardworking, intelligent, and clever, in stark contrast to their depiction of Cambodians and Laotians as immature and lazy (Chou, 1992). These stereotypes fostered a preferential reliance on Vietnamese in administrative roles. As a result, Vietnamese were often treated better and had more opportunities compared to the Khmer. The Vietnamese were frequently recruited as civil servants to manage Cambodians, holding higher positions than the Khmer (Willmott, 1967). This cooperation was formalized after World War I through the policy of "Franco-Annam Cooperation," which did not apply to the Khmer or Laotians (Agathe, 2000, cited in Goscha, 2009). This preferential treatment created economic and social status disparities between the Vietnamese and the indigenous people, exacerbating the grievances of the Cambodians and fostering anti-Vietnamese sentiment among them. The increasing presence of the Vietnamese in urban centers, especially in bureaucratic roles, increasingly clashed with the aspirations of the newly emerging nationalist elite in Cambodia. This elite class resented the significant role of the Vietnamese in managing and developing their state and believed that it was the policies of the French colonialists that caused this situation (Chou, 1992). As a result, Cambodian nationalists began to view the Vietnamese as foreigners, threatening the national identity formed during the colonial period (Goscha, 2009). This tension set the stage for future conflicts and laid the groundwork for the socio-political dynamics that would continue to shape Cambodian society to this day.

The Vietnamese communities in Cambodia were established very early, with significant migration of Vietnamese to Cambodia being strongly promoted during the establishment of the Indochina Union. The French colonial administration implemented economic and social development policies aimed at optimizing labor allocation and administrative efficiency, encouraging a substantial number of Vietnamese to migrate to Cambodia (Amer, 1994b). The colonial government's strategy of using Vietnamese labor was aimed at exploiting Cambodia's economic potential. Over time, these Vietnamese migrants formed strong communities in Cambodia, making significant contributions to the Cambodian economy and society. These early Vietnamese communities created the Vietnamese ethnic group in Cambodia, and many continued to reside in Cambodia after French colonial rule ended here. However, the historical legacy of the colonial period significantly impacted the relationship between the two nations. The preferential treatment of the Vietnamese by the French colonial government raised concerns among the Khmer about the potential domination by Vietnam, contributing to the rise of nationalism in Cambodia. The fear that Vietnamese influence would threaten Cambodia's sovereignty and cultural identity set the stage for subsequent periods of political upheaval and conflict in Cambodia's history (Luo and Un, 2022; Amer, 2010; Ehrentraut, 2014).

3.2. Back and Return Migration of Vietnamese from and to Cambodia (1953-1993)

3.2.1. Migration of Vietnamese from and to Cambodia in 1953-1993

After the end of French colonial rule in Cambodia in 1953, the Vietnamese communities continued to maintain their lives in Cambodia, with the jobs, property, and culture they had established. They engaged in diverse economic activities such as trading, retail, carpentry, mechanical repairs, restaurants, construction, and fishing. Many Vietnamese lived in floating houses on rivers and lakes, particularly on Tonle Sap Lake, the Mekong River, and the Bassac River, as a practical adaptation to the available livelihoods and natural resources. By July 1936, Cambodia's population had exceeded 3 million, including 191,000 Vietnamese, and by 1970, the Vietnamese community in Cambodia had grown to about 450,000 members (Amer, 1994). Estimates of the Vietnamese population in Cambodia over time vary widely, with numbers ranging from 400,000 to 700,000 (Minority Rights Group International; Chandler, 1993, pp. 233 and 267; Chou, 1992; Hiebert, 1984; Vickery, 1986, pp. 2–3 and 165–167). While the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) claimed that there were only 56,000 Vietnamese migrants residing in Cambodia in mid-1983, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) claimed the number had exceeded one million (Amer, 1994). More reliable estimates suggest the Vietnamese population at around 300,000 to 500,000, consistent with figures from the late 1960s (Amer, 2006).

After Cambodia gained independence in 1953, the Sihanouk government (1953-1970) pursued a policy of neutrality, balancing relations with both North and South Vietnam. Although many Vietnamese who migrated during the colonial period remained, contributing to the local economy and society, tensions persisted due to rising nationalism and concerns about Vietnamese influence (Amer, 2017). In this political atmosphere, the Cambodian government enacted measures to marginalize the Vietnamese community. These policies included restrictions on employment, land ownership, and political participation (Willmott, 1967, pp. 46, 79:81). When General Lon Nol's coup in 1970 led to the establishment of the Khmer Republic, Lon Nol publicly adopted a strongly anti-Vietnamese stance. The Vietnamese in Cambodia became targets of suspicion and hostility due to nationalism. The Lon Nol government deported and massacred Vietnamese civilians en masse, leading to significant forced migration (Chandler, 1993; Chou, 1992; Pouvatchy, 1976). Thousands of Vietnamese fled Cambodia, migrating back to Vietnam. This period marked a severe disruption in the presence of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia.

The situation for the Vietnamese worsened further with the rise of the Khmer Rouge in 1975. The Khmer Rouge's extreme xenophobia led to the systematic oppression and extermination of ethnic minorities, including the Vietnamese. Almost all Vietnamese who did not flee during the Lon Nol period were expelled or killed. The Khmer Rouge, with their genocidal and extreme xenophobic policies, aimed to purify Cambodian society of foreign influences (Amer, 1994). In 1979, the Vietnamese army assisted Cambodians in overthrowing the Khmer Rouge and establishing the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). During the PRK period, Vietnamese people who had fled previous conflicts began to return to Cambodia, and they play an important role in Cambodia's reconstruction. While most Cambodians were grateful to the Vietnamese for liberating them from the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, but the presence of 100.000 Vietnamese soldiers, along with political and technical advisors, dominated many aspects of Cambodian life (Chou, 1992), raising suspicions among some political parties and segments of the population.

By the late 1980s, due to centralized economic policies and the collectivization of agriculture in Vietnam, a portion of Vietnamese, including both former residents of Cambodia and new immigrants, migrated to Cambodia (Hoang Minh Vu, 2019), increasing the Vietnamese population in Cambodia to around 300.000 in 1979 and 500.000 in 1981 (Amer, 1994). The rising number of immigrants and the visible presence of Vietnamese in Cambodia continued to evoke mixed feelings among Cambodians regarding the presence of the Vietnamese army and returning migrants. Cambodians often viewed them as new immigrants rather than returning Vietnamese who have settled in Cambodia and their descendants have returned (Chou, 1992; Luo and Un, 2022). In 1991, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established to stabilize Cambodia and prepare for democratic elections. During this period (1991-1993), Vietnamese people had the option to stay in Cambodia or return to Vietnam, with moving back and forth across the Vietnam – Cambodia border was facilitated. Many Vietnamese who had adapted to Cambodian society chose to remain.

It can be observed that in the period from 1953 to 1993, the Vietnam-Cambodia border witnessed complex and chaotic migration patterns of Vietnamese. The Vietnamese played a important role in Cambodia's economic development, especially in agriculture, trade, and infrastructure. During the French colonial period, the Vietnamese played a crucial role in transforming Cambodia's agricultural landscape. They brought with them their knowledge and agricultural techniques, which significantly boosted rice production, a staple of Cambodia's economy. In the colonial period, the Vietnamese participated in the workforce for major infrastructure projects, including roads, bridges, and public works, contributing to building the infrastructure that supported Cambodia's economic activities. Additionally, the Vietnamese contributed to the development of trade and commerce in Cambodia. The Vietnamese who were wholesale and retail traders, established small markets, especially in towns like Phnom Penh, facilitating the flow of goods and services within the region and with neighboring areas. However, due to historical legacies, historical grievances, and extreme ideologies from some Cambodian parties, the Vietnamese community became targets of exclusion and violence. This social exclusion led them to face social barriers in accessing basic services such as education, healthcare, and employment.

3.2.2. *Citizenship and Nationality Status of Vietnamese in Cambodia (1953-1993)*

Statelessness and citizenship have been a significant concern for many Vietnamese Cambodians, rooted deeply in their historical migration patterns and discriminatory policies that have existed over various historical periods. The Vietnamese in Cambodia have faced varying degrees of tolerance and hostility due to colonial regimes and the different ideologies and doctrines embraced by Cambodian leadership and elites. The Vietnamese have been present in the Mekong Delta and areas around the Mekong and Bassac rivers since the 17th century (Amer, 1994b). The organized and encouraged waves of Vietnamese migration to Cambodia largely took place during the colonial period, when the colonial government sought to utilize Vietnamese skills, administrative expertise, and labor for managing and promoting economic and infrastructure projects in Cambodia. However, this migration and settlement were not always accompanied by clear legal documentation. After gaining independence in 1953, Sihanouk (1953–1970) introduced a new classification of Cambodian ethnic groups, identifying indigenous groups in the mountainous regions as ‘Khmer Loeu’ (Highland Khmer), the Cham people as ‘Khmer Islam’, and the Khmer minority residing in the plains as ‘Khmer Krom’ (Lowland Khmer). This classification excluded the Chinese and Vietnamese, despite their long presence in Cambodia, labeling them as immigrant groups rather than ‘pure Khmer’. Sihanouk’s classification became the standard framework shaping Cambodian perceptions of ethnicity to this day (Ehrentraut, 2014; Canzutti, 2022).

The situation worsened after Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970. The Lon Nol government promoted violent anti-Vietnamese nationalism, advocating for the superiority of the Khmer race. During the Khmer Republic, anti-Vietnamese sentiment led to violent purges and mass expulsions, stripping many Vietnamese of any form of legal citizenship. Lon Nol introduced a new constitutional definition of Cambodians as those possessing “Khmer blood, Khmer traditions, Khmer culture, Khmer language, and those born in the territory that is the heritage of our Khmer ancestors” (Edwards, 2007, p. 252). Vietnamese residents were stripped of their citizenship and expelled from the territory through massacres and forced repatriation. Thousands were killed, and about 200,000 of the approximately 450,000 Vietnamese civilians were forced into South Vietnam (Pouvatchy, 1976, pp. 342-347). The situation for the Vietnamese during the Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979) was even worse. The Khmer Rouge’s genocidal policies further devastated the Vietnamese communities, causing survivors to flee back to Vietnam and live in fear. These extremist political regimes not only disrupted the lives of Vietnamese Cambodians but also led to the loss or confiscation of documents proving their existence and legal status, contributing to their statelessness (Berman, 1996).

In the post-Khmer Rouge era, the establishment of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) initially brought a more tolerant atmosphere, as Vietnamese influence on the new government allowed many Vietnamese to return. In 1983, an official policy was implemented for Vietnamese in Cambodia, allowing “former Vietnamese residents in Kampuchea” to “quickly settle down to a normal life” (Goshal et al., 1995, p. 21). Those who arrived after 1979 were permitted to “stay in the country and work,” and new immigrants were required to follow formal immigration procedures. However, most Vietnamese migrants did not adhere to the formal requirements, some tried to obtain some form of identification papers in Cambodia (Gottesman, 2003, p. 163). The People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), later renamed the State of Cambodia (SOC) in 1989, and PRK/SOC officials continued to consider all people of Vietnamese descent as foreigners, even those who were previously Cambodian citizens. The transition to the State of Cambodia and later the Kingdom of Cambodia brought new challenges, as nationalist sentiment and political instability continued to hinder efforts to grant citizenship to Vietnamese Cambodians. Many found themselves in legal limbo, lacking the necessary documents to apply for Cambodian citizenship and facing significant barriers in acquiring Vietnamese naturalization. Cambodian law and administrative practices often require complete documentation and proof of permanent residence, which many Vietnamese Cambodians cannot provide due to historical discontinuities and lost documents. Furthermore, Cambodia’s nationality policy continued to reinforce the notion of a distinct Khmer identity, stripping ethnic Vietnamese citizens of their membership status (Ehrentraut, 2014). This has resulted in generations of Vietnamese living in Cambodia without official

recognition, preventing them from accessing basic rights and services such as education, healthcare, and legal employment. As a result, many Vietnamese Cambodians live in precarious conditions, often settling informally and working in low-paying, unstable jobs.

3.3. Return Migration of Vietnamese (1993 - Present)

3.3.1. Economic and Political Context of Cambodia

After the establishment of the Royal Government of Cambodia in 1993, bilateral efforts between Vietnam and Cambodia continued to resolve border issues and the situation of Vietnamese residents in Cambodia. By the late 1990s, bilateral relations between Vietnam and Cambodia had improved. As agreements were reached between the two governments, issues of security and border control became more formalized (Khánh, 2020; Khánh, 2022; Thảo, 2024; Qué and Son, 2016). Since 2010, Cambodia has focused on economic development and enhancing the state's leadership capacity. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP), currently in power, has embarked on efforts to strengthen state capacity, focusing on significant improvements in the state system and revenue mobilization. Tax revenue increased significantly from 12.1% of GDP in 2013 to 20% in 2020 (World Bank, 2022; Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2021). These achievements have enabled the Cambodian government to address various development goals, including improving water systems, beautifying cities, and restoring social order, all aimed at attracting private investment (Luo and Un, 2022).

An important aspect of the CPP's development plan involves the "cleaning up" of river and lake communities, which are predominantly inhabited by Vietnamese. These floating village communities, located along rivers and lakes, are viewed as obstacles to urban development and environmental improvement. In Phnom Penh, the removal of these floating communities has become a target for economic development as these areas are prime real estate, attracting investors, particularly from Chinese entrepreneurs. Similarly, in Kampong Chhnang, the floating communities have been accused of polluting the ecosystem and disrupting the urban and natural landscape order, reducing property values and discouraging investment. Therefore, the eviction and resettlement of these floating communities have been proposed and implemented to achieve urban development and environmental improvement goals. By increasing state revenue and improving administrative efficiency, the CPP aims to achieve its development goals while ensuring its political legitimacy over other parties (Luo and Un, 2022).

Cambodia-Vietnam and Cambodia-China Relations

Cambodia's relationship with Vietnam has promoted comprehensive cooperation in various fields such as trade, security, and diplomacy. Since the early 2000s, trade between Cambodia and Vietnam has experienced steady growth. Vietnam's exports to Cambodia increased from USD 81 million in 2000 to USD 2.725 billion in 2019. Similarly, Cambodia's exports to Vietnam rose from USD 20 million in 2000 to USD 359 million in 2019 (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2022), making Vietnam Cambodia's third-largest trading partner after China and the United States. Vietnam's position as a major investor in Cambodia, ranking third after China and South Korea (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2022), further strengthens the economic interdependence between the two countries. On the diplomatic front, high-level dialogues between party and government officials take place regularly, in which Vietnam providing significant security assistance to Cambodia (Khánh, 2020; Khánh 2022; Thảo, 2024). This support includes aid during Cambodia's border conflicts with Thailand in 2008 and 2011.

However, the early 21st century marked a significant shift in the region's economic and political dynamics with the rise of China. This shift provided Cambodia with the opportunity to balance its relations with more powerful neighbors and Western influences. Since 2006, China and Cambodia have gradually strengthened their bilateral relationship, initially upgrading it to a comprehensive partnership and later to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2010. In April 2019, marking the 60th anniversary of China-Cambodia relations, the two countries signed the Action Plan for Building a China-Cambodia Community with a Shared Future (2019-2023). This plan includes enhancing cooperation in politics, economics, trade, investment, tourism, and culture, highlighting the strategic depth of China's foreign relations and its policy of friendly, sincere, mutually beneficial, and

comprehensive neighborly relations. Cambodia has been a fervent supporter of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), recognizing the significant economic opportunities it brings. Bilateral trade between China and Cambodia increased to USD 7.39 billion in 2018. Chinese investment in Cambodia reached USD 7.9 billion from 2016 to 2019, accounting for 35% of total foreign investment in the country. Strategically, this relationship is bolstered by the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ), which has become a cornerstone of the Belt and Road Initiative in Cambodia, home to more than 130 manufacturers, creating more than 20,000 jobs, and contributing significantly to the local GDP (Wang, 2023). At the same time, China's aid to Cambodia has grown significantly, underscoring China's commitment to Cambodia's economic development. The military ties between China and Cambodia has also been strengthened by increased aid, joint military exercises, and strategic projects such as the renovation of the Ream Naval Base, which has drawn international attention due to perceived geostrategic motives (Luo and Un, 2022).

Support from China has motivated Cambodia to assert its sovereignty more strongly, reducing its dependence on Vietnam's approval and support. This strategic balancing act demonstrates Cambodia's CPP Party's navigation of regional power dynamics, leveraging its relationship with China to mitigate its vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Vietnam. The strengthened China-Cambodia relationship has allowed Cambodia to gain significant leverage in its dealings with Vietnam, enabling Cambodia to address sensitive issues such as the status of Vietnamese immigrants more decisively. The Cambodian government has also tightened immigration policies, and since 2015, it has deported 5,223 Vietnamese from Cambodia (Luo and Un, 2022). As a result, the flow of Vietnamese returning to Vietnam from Cambodia has become more common and frequent since 2015.

3.3.2. Economic and Social Life of Vietnamese in Cambodia and Their Return Migration to Vietnam

In Southeast Asian historical studies, it is argued that since the mapping and demarcation of modern national borders, these borders have gradually become fixed in the collective imagination of a nation - state through stricter policies on the control of goods and people (Thongchai 1994; Osada 2011). Before the French invasion of Vietnam, the border between Vietnam and Cambodia was very loosely managed, with no clearly defined national boundary. Crossing the border via unofficial routes was common until the 1990s, with Khmer and Vietnamese ethnic groups traveling across the border using small roads along the border through kinship and social networks, and river and sea transport intermediaries. The border between Vietnam and Cambodia became more clearly demarcated and strictly managed starting in the 1990s. Also during these decades, Vietnam underwent economic reforms known as *Đổi Mới*, integrating into the international economy and promoting a market economy. The subsequent economic growth in the 2000s led to a boom in industries around Ho Chi Minh City, attracting migration of rural residents and simultaneously drawing back Vietnamese migrants from Cambodia. Many migrants who had migrated to Cambodia during the period of agricultural collectivization returned to Vietnam as the country's economic and social conditions improved, especially as the status and position of Vietnamese in Cambodia became more precarious.

In Cambodia, attacks on the Vietnamese community occurred between 1996 and 1998, largely carried out by the Khmer Rouge, resulting in the deaths of dozens of Vietnamese civilians. Following the 1998 election, violent attacks on the Vietnamese community began to decrease in 1999 and 2000 (United Nations, 1998, cited in Sperfeldt and Nguyen, 2012). The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Human Rights in Cambodia (SRSG) reported an incident in October 1999, when the Phnom Penh city government decided to relocate around 700 Vietnamese families living in floating houses on the Bassac River to Kandal province. Although the authorities did not check the identification documents of the displaced families, they were still considered illegal immigrants. The SRSG report noted that although many families had legal documents recognizing them as citizens of Cambodia, many had their documents confiscated by the authorities. When these families began arriving at the designated resettlement areas, local authorities tried to prevent them from staying, resulting in more than a hundred families continuing downstream to the Vietnamese border (Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for human rights in Cambodia by Mr. Thomas Hammarberg, 2000, cited in Sperfeldt and Nguyen, 2012).

Currently, social exclusion and stigmatization of Vietnamese people have become a political target for parties in Cambodia, often pushing Vietnamese Cambodians into informal and low-income economic sectors, including fishing, small-scale trading, and manual labor. These occupations are typically characterized by low wages, lack of job security, and limited opportunities for advancement. In these informal jobs, Vietnamese Cambodians do not have access to official benefits or labor protections, such as health insurance, pensions, or stable employment. The lack of citizenship and identification documents forces many Vietnamese to live in public land areas, such as floating villages on rivers and lakes or informal settlements on the outskirts of urban centers. These areas are often characterized by poor infrastructure and lack basic services, including limited access to clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and education, and are vulnerable to environmental hazards like floods and storms. Their precarious legal status makes it difficult for them to obtain higher-paying and more stable jobs. As a result, they remain trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, struggling with social barriers to secure basic needs and livelihoods.

4. Conclusion

The social marginalization of Vietnamese Cambodians has deep historical roots that have shaped their socio-economic status and ability to access economic opportunities and integrate into society. Historically, the Vietnamese communities in Cambodia have faced significant discrimination and exclusion, often driven by nationalist sentiments and political instability. During periods of political unrest, such as the Lon Nol regime and the Khmer Rouge era, Vietnamese Cambodians were subjected to targeted violence, expulsion, and systematic exclusion from economic and social life. These historical events disrupted the pre-established socio-economic foundations of the Vietnamese communities, leaving long-lasting impacts that continue to affect their economic and social well-being today. Their migration patterns have been heavily influenced by persistent socio-political instability in Cambodia, political upheaval, and periods of anti-Vietnamese psychological campaigns. These factors have created an unstable and insecure environment, prompting many Vietnamese Cambodians to seek safety and better economic opportunities by returning to Vietnam. This historically recurring migration pattern highlights the complexity of push factors in Cambodia and pull factors in Vietnam, with the ultimate goal of achieving a more stable and secure livelihood in the choice of migrants.

Vietnamese Cambodians have long faced significant legal and bureaucratic challenges in obtaining citizenship and legal residency status. Historically, the concept of "pure Khmer" ethnicity has shaped the perception of citizenship in Cambodia. Many Vietnamese settled in Cambodia without valid identification documents, both during the French colonial period and subsequent political instability. The unstable political climate in Cambodia over different periods has led to varying degrees of openness and restriction on citizenship rights for the Vietnamese. During times of intense nationalism, the Cambodian government tightened citizenship policies, making it even more difficult for the Vietnamese to gain legal recognition. In some cases, these policies included mass deportations or revocations of residency rights, forcing many Vietnamese to leave Cambodia. Conversely, there have been periods when the government sought to stabilize and develop the country, showing tolerance and allowing many Vietnamese to legalize their status. However, this tolerance has often been unpredictable and could be reversed by changes in the political landscape, leaving the Vietnamese communities vulnerable to instability and uncertainty. The bureaucratic barriers to obtaining legal residency and citizenship rights in Cambodia are significant challenges for the Vietnamese communities, often involving complex procedures, high costs, and the need for connections with local officials. The lack of legal status has persisted across generations, making it difficult for many Vietnamese Cambodians to access basic rights and social services such as education and healthcare, and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination. This precarious legal situation has led many Vietnamese Cambodians to return to Vietnam, where, despite facing many challenges, they hope to find a more stable and recognized socio-economic and legal environment.

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