What is it like to be a child of two worlds? Vietnamese in heritage, but raised in another culture, young Viet Kieu are returning to the country of their parents to confront this question. *AsiaLIFE* this month spoke to many second generation Viet Kieu to find out more about their fascinating and varied experiences. By Brett Davis. Photos by Fred Wissink.
Waves of migrants have left Vietnamese shores, particularly after 1975, and the now estimated four million-strong Vietnamese diaspora is spread around the world. The term Viet Kieu (literally ‘Vietnamese sojourner’) or ‘Overseas Vietnamese’ is a phrase used here to loosely describe this group of people.

But what of the next generation, the children of the sojourners? Those born overseas or who left as infants are, in a sense, children of two worlds. They grow up in a country and absorb a culture alien to that of their parents and often to what they experience in the home.

Many of these second generation Viet Kieu are coming to Vietnam to live and work, and must confront this cultural dichotomy. Yet what these encounters are like is as varied as the number of people you ask.

Mytoan Nguyen is studying the experiences of second generation Viet Kieu returning to Vietnam as part of her PhD research at the University of Wisconsin. She found there was a great deal of variation in why second generation Viet Kieu came to Vietnam.

“To further their career, to figure out themselves, to reimagine what that history is, there is a whole range of stories that I’ve encountered.

“Depending on what those motives are, I think that also frames what their expectations were of what their experiences would be like in Vietnam, how would they be treated and how accepting or not accepting local Vietnamese family and strangers would be towards Viet Kieu.”
Not least among the questions facing Viet Kieu in Vietnam is the issue of identity. Do you identify as Vietnamese, the country of your heritage, or do you identify as a person of the foreign country you grew up in? There are also those that feel they identify as different nationalities depending on the situation.

This is an issue that is subtly asked even if not actively contemplated from an early age. Out in the world these second generation Viet Kieu are of the culture of the country where they live, but in their parents’ home they are imbued with traditional Vietnamese values and culture. It is not surprising this can sometimes feel exhausting.

Viet Nguyen, an Associate Professor at the University of Southern California and the editor of the Vietnamese culture and arts blog Diacritics, says his identity is dependent on context.

“In Vietnam, I’m an American or a Vietnamese-American, but not a Vietnamese,” he says. “In the States, I’m an American to those who don’t see me as an American, a Vietnamese-American to those Vietnamese who insist they’re not American, and a Vietnamese when I’m too weary to go through all the explanations about how complex my identity is.”

This process of figuring out identity, asking yourself the question ‘Who am I?’ is ongoing for some, while others have long since stopped being concerned about it. Then there are those that have arrived at some workable definition.

Five years ago Lin Pham moved from Canada back to the country she left as an infant. She says the process of working out her identity took several years. “Here I would consider myself as Canadian-Vietnamese, in Canada I consider myself Vietnamese-Canadian,” she says.

“I’m more of a foreigner here in context to the location and back in Canada as a visual minority I would identify myself more as Vietnamese.”

Joshua Turner left Vietnam as a child in the early 80s, and now is part of the Early Risers Media Group, based in Saigon. He grew up in London before spending a number of years in Aberdeen, Scotland. He is quite forthright about the mobility of his identity and the usefulness this flexibility affords him in his business.

“It changes depending on the circumstances. In my business, if I’m very honest with you, it depends basically on who I’m talking to,” he says.

“The good part about being Viet Kieu is you can play on both. When you’re speaking to a foreign investor, for example, it really helps that I grew up in the UK. When I’m
dealing with the government, it helps extraordinarily that I was born here and that I’m Vietnamese. So being the person in between, if you can get it right it can be very lucrative.

The Return
An easy assumption about the motivation for second generation Viet Kieu to come to Vietnam is that they want to establish a connection to their roots, the cultural heritage of their parents’ homeland. While this is indeed partly true for many, it is often born more out of an intellectual sense of curiosity rather than an emotional pull back to Vietnam.

Timing and opportunity are two factors that play a large part in any major life decision a person makes. It is no different for many of the Viet Kieu who made the decision to live here. The urge to try something new or make a career change was also cited several times as a reason for acting on that desire to ‘one day’ try living in Vietnam.

RMIT University Vietnam lecturer Landon Carnie was airlifted out of Vietnam (actually twice—the first plane crashed shortly after takeoff) as an infant with his twin sister in 1975. The two were adopted by a Mormon family and grew up in the north-west of the United States.

“It was mostly curiosity. You see things in the paper, an article or two. I saw an article on the 25th anniversary of the end of the war and that’s what sparked it, I said ‘I want to go’. That’s why I came back here around that time.

“Then I came back to live in 2002. The reason I decided to stay was to immerse myself more in the culture, and things were kind of up in the air with my job so it seemed like a good time.”

A burgeoning economy in Vietnam and the many professional opportunities this has created has also lured many. This is an even more powerful force when considering dire conditions in many major Western economies in recent years.

Tram Nguyen says her decision to move here from Australia was driven equally by a desire to reconnect with her roots and to take advantage of career opportunities.

“Professionally, I had an urge to come over here because I just loved what was going on and all of the development, and there was so much opportunity. And also because I did feel emotionally connected and attached to this place in a way. I still do.”

Mother Tongue
Language is the most direct gateway into a culture and to connect with people. The language skills of second generation Viet Kieu range from near native fluency to almost nothing. This obviously has an effect on their
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Mytoan Nguyen says she found through her research that language was a key factor in shaping the kind of experience Viet Kieus have when coming to the country. “Those [Viet Kieu] with language skills obviously can do a little bit better than the ones who might have been second generation and grew up without any exposure to the Vietnamese language and away from the immigrant enclaves.”

Andy Lam left Vietnam as an infant with his family and grew up in Canada, and only learned Vietnamese after he returned in 2005. For him this not only altered his experience of the country but also within his own family. He says he was able to really talk to his parents for the first time. “My whole life growing up if I couldn’t say anything it was like, ‘Hey sis, can you come here and translate for me’. Can you imagine that, going through life having to speak to your parents through a translator? Now, when I speak to them I can converse, and I can see it is such a relief to my mum.”

Local Relations
But how have the second generation Viet Kieu been received by the locals? Generally their experiences have been positive, with curiosity about their lives in foreign countries of particular interest.

Joshua Turner believes it comes down to how Viet Kieu react to local people and situations. “In terms of being treated, it depends on how [Viet Kieu] behave. Initially you might get a funny look, but it’s not necessarily a funny look, it’s just interest. I think how we react to that is how [local Vietnamese] react back.”

As with all human interactions, you tend to get out of them what you put in. If you are respectful and courteous towards people they
are more than likely to return the sentiment and this is what most of the people we spoke to have encountered.

There can be some deviation from this reaction in certain situations, particularly with relation to money or gender. When it comes to the price of goods and services, a Viet Kieu is likely to be seen as a foreigner and charged accordingly.

A few of the people we spoke to give some financial assistance to their local relatives, but this is motivated more out of using their relatively high incomes to help out, rather than from any overt pressure to give money. The growing prosperity of people in HCM City is also seen as a factor in them not feeling this pressure.

For Viet Kieu women the adjustment to expected gender roles can sometimes be a challenge. After leaving France at the beginning of the year to take part in an internship at a manufacturing company, Carine Nguyen has encountered some difficulties with her local colleagues.

“People are very courteous and they are very kind to me, but then I cannot do anything for my work because they do not take me seriously, maybe because of my age and because I am a woman,” she says.

Mutual Benefits
The experiences of second generation Viet Kieu coming to Vietnam covers a broad spectrum. However, there is little doubt that the return of these sons and daughters of Vietnam has the potential to be a positive for all concerned.

Connecting with their heritage and opening up broader career opportunities is a valuable springboard for young Viet Kieu. Likewise, the country as a whole can benefit from the knowledge and skill they bring to the land of their ancestors.