SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF MIGRANTS LIVING IN DORMITORIES IN THE PROCESS OF URBANIZATION: A FOCUS ON BÌNH TRỊ ĐÔNG, VIỆT NAM

by

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Abstract

In the last decade there has been a substantial increase of new migrants into large cities in Việt Nam, changing the social, cultural, and political fabric of Hồ Chí Minh City. Rapid urbanization and land use changes in Hồ Chí Minh City have occurred alongside mass internal migration. The movement of people has become an important piece in the 1986 economic reforms of đổi mới and a main focus of Vietnamese public policy from the late 1990s until today. With the influx of new actors comes a new set of social interactions and negotiations between people in daily life that are embedded within a broader socio-economic framework.

New liberal policies on internal migration have spurred great mass internal migration into cities which has several implications for not only the entire country, but specific to this research, for the social dynamics of how Bình Trị Đồng ward is managing the influx of migrants. Not only did this field research seek to explore the social relationships and integration among migrants living on the urban fringe but the issue of local governance and infrastructure provisions in the form of migrant housing is central to this research. In short, this thesis asks: what are the social experiences of migrants living in Bình Trị Đồng? What is the role of local government, if any, in managing the social and cultural changes among migrants? My research finds that migrants are each striving towards their own individual goals of economic gains, treating Bình Trị Đồng as a temporary living space, thus preventing a strong sense of community and social bonds from flourishing. Meanwhile, more equitable planning policies of prioritizing the needs of ordinary citizens over economic development signal a shift in local development policies. Yet the government’s shift towards greater participation has not necessarily changed the lived experiences of residents. Migrants here are oriented towards their own goals thus stunting interpersonal relationships and deepening social segregation, leading one to question what ties, if any, unite people in this neighborhood.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

When I was in Việt Nam from May to August 2007, three important events occurred: (1) the 2007 National Residency Law was passed; (2) 50% of the world’s population officially became “urban”; and (3) for the first time, Việt Nam advanced to the quarter finals vs. Iraq in the Asia World Cup. These three events are all interconnected: they bring people together, even if only temporarily, across geographic and spatial boundaries to form a “community.” These forms of social connectedness set the tone for this thesis that is largely centered upon questions of social interactions and social relationships through linkages that transcend geographic boundaries.

I have long been fascinated with the movement of people and social relationships, largely as a personal exploration to seek answers for my own self-fulfillment. Since childhood, issues of ethnic identity, location (or conversely, dislocation), and belongingness were questions I struggled to understand. My Chinese-Vietnamese-Canadian identity was never easily defined, and my parents’ neat categories offered little satisfaction to ease my curiosity. This thesis, which grapples to untangle the complicated processes of migration and the social relationships that are forged with those left behind and those we come into contact with, is thus, in large part, a self-explorative undertaking for me to come to make sense of my own ethnic identity. In pursuing my field research, through discussions with migrants who have travelled far distances, separated from loved ones, and who must adapt to a strange land, it has become increasingly apparent to me that defining oneself and understanding one’s belonging in the world are questions that will never and can never be fully answered.

We are all social creatures. Social relationships and social connectedness are the foundation of human experience. The site of study for this thesis is a small neighbourhood called Bình Trị Đông (BTD), located on the urban edge of Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), Việt Nam. This area was chosen because of the rapid changes it has undergone in a short period of time. In the last five years there has been a substantial increase of new groups into this region, thus changing the social, cultural, and political fabric of the “edge of the city.” Unlike other parts of the city where urban dwellers largely outnumber urban migrants, Bình Trị Đông is the reverse in which a disproportionately high number of rural migrants live here compared to urbanites. As
such, the area is undergoing a substantial qualitative change regarding the social dynamics of the groups who define the area. Thus the central issue explored here is the nature of social relationships among migrants living in dormitories in Bình Trị Đông and institutional capacity to support these changes.

Christopher Bryant’s (1995) emphasis on the urban fringe as an arena where a variety of actors and forces operate to influence the dynamics of human activity is important for understanding this paper. He gives particular attention to local actors as the central driving factor behind reasons for land use changes, individuals who are also the main focus of this paper. These developments operate on a macro level by linking activities on urban fringe systems of exchange to international and national levels; on a micro level, which considers local actors and individual experiences; and the meso level in which a variety of factors influence the expansion of the urban population into the urban fringe (257-258). As such, this paper is framed within meso and micro level considerations.

This report has a dual approach. First, it uses a micro level approach to examine the social interactions within communities. How relationships are experienced and managed offers great insight into people’s lives. This thesis seeks to understand what the social experiences and social relationships are among migrants living in Bình Trị Đông. Questions of community, and more specifically, how migrants living in dormitory housing create, reject, or are indifferent to community togetherness is integral to this thesis.

Second, it explores how this small community interacts within a broader framework of local government and urban change under a meso level framework. Or as DeFillipis et al. (2006) articulated, “Communities need to be simultaneously understood as products of their larger and external context as well as the practices, organizations, and relations that take place within them” (673). The role of local governance to nourish communities via greater public participation will be examined. Additionally, other broader issues of urban change which shape the social experiences of migrants will also be considered: urbanization and the urban fringe, migrant housing, and local governance in Bình Trị Đông. Thus this thesis is built around three central questions:
(1) Social relationships in Bình Trị Đông: What are the social behaviours of migrants living in migrant dormitories in the context of a rapidly urbanizing area?

(2) “Community” in Bình Trị Đông: What does community mean to migrants and how do they shape their community? What is the nature of their community-based social networks?

(3) Local governance in Bình Trị Đông: In the context of rapid urbanization, what is the role of the local government and planning policies in Bình Trị Đông?

1.1 Objectives

This Master’s thesis has two primary objectives. First, it is designed to take a closer look at the more “human side” of migration from a qualitative research approach. With the country’s remarkable annual growth in recent years, this means the influx of new migrants will continue to have profound changes on social dynamics and social interactions, challenging and re-defining previous notions of community. Second, this thesis highlights the issues faced by migrants once they reach their destination and suggest how these may have relevance for community-based policy-making strategies (e.g., to put forward ideas that may be useful to the development and implementation of future local programs aimed at integrating migrants into the community).

1.2 Structure

This thesis is divided into eight chapters, beginning with a review of field research conditions in chapter 2. My field research methodology consisted of a series of qualitative open-ended questionnaires, participant observation, and review of official government documents and secondary data over a three-month period. Research limitations and constraints will also be addressed.

Chapter 3 provides a literature review of contemporary Việt Nam, largely focusing on trends since the đổi mới economic reforms were introduced in 1986. This chapter is sub-divided into categories of land reforms, urbanization, and internal migration in the country.

A closer examination of the social, cultural, and economic conditions of Bình Trị Đông within Hồ Chí Minh City is the purpose of chapter 4. Site-specific analysis that
combines quantitative data, my own observations, and discussions with landowners is included. An analysis of housing shortages and deteriorating housing conditions in the city is given. The neighbourhood, and specifically, migrant dormitories are described in detail. Examples are drawn from other parts of the city to highlight the persistent problem of inadequate housing and inadequate solutions to address these problems.

Chapter 5 is devoted to telling life stories of migrants living in Bình Trị Đông. The purpose of this section is to transcribe these stories faithfully by offering first-hand accounts from migrants. In seeking to understand the dynamic changes underway in Bình Trị Đông ward, this section will develop around central sub-themes which have emerged from my field research: helping behavior, regional differences, place and belonging, migrant identity, and community. Free-flowing conversation was encouraged between myself and informants which allowed for different issues to emerge under a less structured environment.

Integral to understanding the social dynamics of migrants in this area is the role of the local government, which is the focus of chapter 6. Different levels of government in Việt Nam have adopted a new mandate of participatory planning for making life more suitable for migrants under the rhetoric of a common good for its inhabitants. My discussions with local officials centre on participatory planning and greater public inclusiveness. More equitable planning policies that prioritize local needs over economic development signal a departure from the government’s strong top-down approaches in the past. I will argue however that this task of public participation is not as simple as it seems given the very divergent interests and social disconnectedness of the inhabitants who live in this peri-urban area. Migrants are each striving toward their own individual goals of economic gains, treating Bình Trị Đông as a temporary living space, thus preventing a strong sense of community and social bonds from flourishing. This chapter concludes by questioning whether such institutional policies have made any changes in the lived experiences of its inhabitants.

Chapter 7 offers a theoretical framework designed to tie together my experience in this community. Theoretical explorations into community, loss of community, and

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1 By referring to “landowners”, I am referring to individuals who claim ownership of land for use.
regionalism will be drawn from Hellmut Wollmann, Ash Amin, Arjun Appadurai, and Benedict Anderson. The implications of each are discussed.

The final chapter concludes with a brief summary and analysis of the research.
Chapter 2: Institutional Setting and Research Methodology

2.1 Institutional Setting and Framework

Benefiting from my thesis supervisor Dr. Michael Leaf’s affiliations with researchers and scholars in Việt Nam, I had the privilege of working with the Centre for Sociology & Development Studies at the Southern Institute of Social Sciences (SISS). Established in 1975, the SISS is a government institution that receives the majority of its funding through research grants both nationally and internationally. The institute conducts research through external sources of funding as well as applying for research grants independently. Scholars from overseas who are seeking to conduct field research will request collaboration from the SISS and at the same time, internal requests for funding will come from researchers within the institute if there is a project or issue they wish to be involved in. My research fell in line with the former, as a Master’s student whose field research was being supported under the Canadian fellowship, Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia (ChATSEA) project.

From 1999 to 2004, the SISS carried out extensive quantitative and longitudinal field research in Bình Trị Đồng funded by the Ford Foundation in the United States. This project examined urban socio-economic mobility and socio-economic differentiation in a context of rapid urbanization and in-migration. Three different neighbourhoods were used to conduct over 1,000 household interviews in Bình Trị Đồng ward (then part of Bình Chánh district), Cầu Kho ward in District 1, and Ward 6 in Tân Bình district. A significant amount of data was collected which are not yet available on-line or through academic journals. As such, the institute has several site-specific research reports from the last five years which enriched an understanding of the area. Up until the unforeseen collapse of the SISS’s building on 9 October 2007, the institute was in the process of

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2 The Southern Institute of Social Sciences (SISS) was renamed twice. Originally named the South Vietnam Institute of Social Science, it was renamed the Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City in 1978. In 2004, was again renamed to the Southern Institute of Social Sciences (SISS) (or Viễn Khoa Học Xã Hội Vùng Nam Bội).

3 ChATSEA is an acronym for The Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia project (ChATSEA) which is sponsored under the Major Collaborative Research Initiatives (MCRI) of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). This program supports research on broad and critical issues of intellectual, social, economic and cultural significance through the coordination and integration of diverse research activities and research results. For more information please visit http://www.caac.umontreal.ca.

4 On the evening of 9 October 2007, the SISS building collapsed caused by the construction of the neighbouring Pacific Beer Company (Công ty TNHH bia Thái Bình Dương). Fortunately there were no fatalities. The SISS is currently in the process of finding a new building but they have lost irreplaceable documents, books, recordings, computers, and personal items which have been devastating.
compiling and editing the numerous journals and reports for publication after this five-year project. Without access to such extensive studies of the area, my research would have been incomplete. For this access I am eternally grateful.

2.2 Conditions and Constraints of Research in Việt Nam

The research team at the Centre for Sociology & Development is lead by the Director of Sociology & Development and three junior researchers (some of whom are working towards their Master’s degrees) in addition to the endless support from the former director of the department who is now retired yet still actively involved in various research projects. On several occasions, I used the assistance of a Sociology professor from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hồ Chí Minh City, who generously volunteered to accompany me numerous times to translate interviews. With a history of carrying out internationally-funded field research, the institute adheres to strict protocols. This includes satisfying particular bureaucratic steps before conducting field research and following a strict research methodology, although each researcher had his or her own individual style of conducting ethnographic research. Initially there was a delay in obtaining official district-level approval for carrying out field research since my arrival coincided with the upcoming 12th National Assembly elections on 20 May 2007.

My research had to be sensitive to the fact that migration within Việt Nam is only recently becoming more socially acceptable and previous restrictions continue to have deep-seated and long-term implications for migrants themselves. This undertaking thus had to confront traditional notions of migrants held by urbanites, local ward officials, and beliefs that were internalized by migrants themselves. A progressive change in mentality on behalf of non-migrants themselves still needs time. Although official restrictions on movement are being lifted, there are psychological anxieties associated with the movement of people without proper hộ khẩu, or household registration cards. Migrants are still somewhat cautious in what they may reveal. Unregistered migrants rarely explicitly state that their “unregistered” hộ khẩu made them hesitant to express themselves fully, however it is implicit upon the researcher to realize that their responses

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5 Văn Thị Ngọc Lan, Director for the Centre for Sociology & Development, Southern Institute of Social Sciences; Junior Researchers Hà Thúc Dũng, Lê Thế Vững, and Nguyễn Đăng Minh Thảo; former director Nguyễn Quang Vinh
6 Lê Ngọc Phương
may be quite inhibited. For example, partway through an interview, one migrant worker confessed that she was nervous that we may have been local officials inquiring about why she had not renewed her hồ khâu. Upon explaining the purpose of our visit, she said her nervousness subsided; still, her initial anxiety speaks to other broader societal issues.

On an institutional level, a shift in thinking about rural people as geographically mobile is not yet entirely embraced. In my discussions with people, particularly urbanites and even some migrants who themselves have moved to the city, the psychological underpinnings of people “belonging” and “attached” to their village have not entirely dissipated. Rigg (2006) observes that this mentality is still held by government officials, development practitioners, as well as researchers who express a strong moral preference for village life and rural pursuits. A normative preference, according to Rigg, is that rural people should remain in the countryside and stick to farming activities (187). Embedded in these traditional notions of the city are entitlement of who does or does not have claims to space and equal citizenship rights. It will take authorities, city planners, and urbanites some time to accept changes in their surroundings which are now being characterized more and more by villagers, who were traditionally deprived of what Henri Lefebvre (1996) calls “the right to the city” or the right of all citizens to shape and benefit from urban life (138).

2.3 Research Methodology: Open-Ended Interviews and Participant Observation

An integral part of carrying out ethnographic field research is participant observation. Researchers engaged in this technique must spend a significant amount of time trying to not only observe local surroundings but, I feel, to integrate him or herself as much as they can. This can be done by objective observation (as a spectator) from the outside or through a more subjective lens of being actively engaged with the community. Participant observation through listening, watching, and recording to make researchers more attentive of the mundane details that may be taken for granted. By observing others in their natural environment we are able to understand the deeper processes at work, sometimes obtaining fascinating insights into people’s social lives and relationships. By being socially aware we are able to contextualize our conversations with people into a wider social context in order to make meaning of our research. Through observing and
recording behaviors and habits, it is the researcher’s task to then sort through this descriptive information and to make sense of it.

As part of qualitative research in Bình Trị Đông, this meant spending as much time as possible in this area. Aside from the interviews conducted with researchers from the institute, I would frequently make my own trips to Bình Trị Đông to observe and engage in daily human activity: for morning coffee, enjoying a meal at a food stall for dinner, or buying fruit at the busy street market. A small café outside along a small road that caters to many migrants became one of my favorite spots to engage in conversations with locals. I was also fortunate enough to have extended family members living on Bà Hom, one of the busiest streets in Bình Trị Đông, with whom I would regularly visit. It was through this connection that I was able to not only depend less on formal structured interviews with the SISS but also to speak informally with their friends, neighbors, and relatives living in Bình Trị Đông. Since we were able to communicate in Cantonese and some English, this meant that they were able to translate any difficulties I had. This social connection also gave me the opportunity to establish myself in the community a lot better. Frequently being in this area was a deliberate strategy to make my presence as frequent as possible in this neighborhood and thus moving from spectator to embodying the *tính cách* (meaning personality or character) of a local Vietnamese. By the end of the three months, I was not only thinking in Vietnamese but had trouble going back to speaking English. This strategy of integration echoes John Friedmann’s (1998) argument for professionals’ (or anyone’s) obligation to be truly engaged by “remaining open” to the communities they are interested in. This approach is one that guides my conduct. He specifies:

Not only to be respectful of difference, though this is certainly a good beginning. It also means a life-long posture of learning about other modes of being-in-the-world, empathy for lifeways that are different from those to which we have grown accustomed. It implies a willingness to engage others… (Friedemann 1998: 33)

My intent here is to highlight the importance of being a researcher, but much like Friedmann urges, the value of remaining open is the cornerstone of ethnographic research. Given time and financial constraints, I tried to do this to my best efforts.

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7 One researcher later told me that although I was overseas Vietnamese, I was “thực sự có sự khác nhau rõ nét trong tính cách của một người Phương Tây và một người Việt Nam” or “really different behaviour of a Westerner, same behaviour as a Vietnamese.”
2.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

The purpose of this field research was to gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics of migrants living in Bình Trị Đông. A quantitative approach based on a large number of questionnaires was not the intent of this research. My central research methodology was qualitative and thus, three open-ended semi-structured questionnaires with migrants, urban residents, and local officials were developed and translated for each group. Migrant interview guidelines were structured around main questions and issues, serving more as guidelines to “oral histories” or “life stories” and modified appropriately during the interviews according to the researcher’s and translator’s discretion. Since my research was qualitative and ethnographic, I developed an interview guideline with key themes and questions centered around key topics and a series of open-ended questions. This received approval from the institute which also translated the interview guidelines from English to Vietnamese. The length of interviews, initially considered too short for some, became quite lengthy in the field. Some interviews lasted over two hours, not to mention the return follow-up conversations we had with migrants. Interviews with government officials consisted of more focused questions. New guidelines were also developed as we went along depending on the government officials with whom we were able to interview.

2.5 Limitations

One of the most challenging aspects was striking a balance between my research methodology and the institute’s methodology while ensuring that valuable information did not get lost in translation. A very rigid institutional research methodology protocol was also a concern for my field research. It is the SISS’s policy to tape record all interviews as their way of maintaining official documentation. This technique is carried out as a way of ensuring that the details of all conversations are not missed, especially since the researchers must subsequently transcribe interviews and prepare reports because they are accountable to external sources of funding. This meant that each researcher was very careful in his or her techniques. The act of tape-recording may have aroused some mistrust by respondents. I would have preferred to avoid tape recording conversations because of the slight anxiety people may have felt. Although we received full consent to
record before proceeding, this could create more “socially acceptable” responses rather than genuine ones. Judging from body language and other subtle cues, however, respondents became more comfortable as the interviews carried on.

Figure 2.1: Two SISS researchers prepare for interviews outside several nhà trọ in Bình Trị Đông
Left: Nguyễn Đăng Minh Thảo; Right: Lê Thế Vượng
Source: Own collection

Also the presence of myself, an overseas Vietnamese (also referred to as Việt Kiều), with another researcher approaching migrants in a highly localized neighborhood may have been intimidating despite our efforts to assuage respondents’ anxieties. This was initially a slightly uncomfortable situation for me, and my efforts to engage in a less structured research technique on my own helped to combat the more controlled techniques employed by the institute. My basic grasp of Vietnamese language also meant that each research collaborator had to take on the additional role of translator. Depending on how conversations flowed, detailed translations would sometimes be done during an interview, and sometimes only loose translations were done. At other times, there was no translation during the interview itself, with listening and translating tape-recordings done after the interview. In any case, there was a sense of anxiety and awkwardness associated with translating and back-translating in addition to breaking the flow of conversation. Still, we found ways to make each person feel comfortable and I was particularly
impressed with how the researchers would use humor or other approaches to make each migrant feel more at ease.

Lack of privacy posed a slight problem for carrying out interviews. Upon agreeing to be interviewed, we asked the interviewee where they would feel most comfortable conducting the interview. Many respondents preferred to stay in their rental dormitory (called nhà trọ) during interviews. The physical layout of migrant dormitories is such that each dorm room is built next door to one another, coupled by poor acoustics which means sound travels well (a more detailed description is offered in chapter 4). Although we would request that other roommates, family, or friends not be present during the interview, those in the next room or down the hall could faintly hear our discussions. Thus, a lack of privacy is a problem faced by migrants in their daily lives, meant their response to questions—particularly very personal questions—may not have been answered entirely honestly as their heightened awareness to their surroundings may have inhibited their response.

Finally, as qualitative research goes, the experiences, challenges, relationships, and life trajectories of the individuals I met are not enough to represent an entire subgroup, let alone an entire city or country. It is important to emphasize that this thesis does not promise answers to dynamic and ever-changing processes of change. Equally important, I must caution that the particular national and regional dynamics taking place in Bình Trị Đồng should not be generalized to a wider population, always keeping in mind that different regions experience different regional development trajectories (Deshingkar 2006: 7).
Chapter 3: Urban Changes and Challenges in Contemporary Việt Nam

This chapter is a short review of the urban changes underway in contemporary Việt Nam. Migrant stories are central to this narrative but they are also inextricably linked to a wider cultural and institutional context from which they operate. As such, the purpose of this section is to provide background for understanding the particular economic, geographic, and social changes that have unfolded in the country since the country’s economic reforms in 1986 and how these larger processes influence a smaller neighbourhood.

3.1 Economic Reforms and Land Conversion

First, then, it is important to understand how land conversion has ushered widespread change into the country. Land rights are an important issue in developing countries in which land is a major asset for most people. Rapid economic and social change in Việt Nam has been largely attributed to đổi mới, a series of economic reforms initiated by the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986 that was designed to move the country from a centrally-planned to a market economy. These new policies gradually facilitated the movement of people and capital, and some have observed that Việt Nam has experienced some of the most rapid economic growth of all transition countries since these reforms (Kim 2004: 276).

The year 1988 has been described as “by far the single most important phase of đổi mới” in which the national government recognized the rights of inheritance and land transfer of individual farmers (Kolko 1997: 90). Albeit under ambiguous terms, these land use changes meant property ownership was under the control of the people rather than the state where the government would act only as an administrator (Gainsborough 2002; Quang & Kammeier 2002). Land ownership marked a departure from traditional practices and for the first time in Việt Nam, land could be bought and sold. Although the effects of these reforms were only felt years later, attaching monetary value meant that changes in land use became a central issue. Gabriel Kolko (1997: 93) has been openly critical on how fundamental changes in social relationships have led to traumatic consequences, negatively affecting three-quarters of the country’s rural population. He cites that some 4 million hectares of land were scheduled for re-allocation after 1988, and
from this, land disputes emerged in which 200,000 written complaints on land use rights were submitted in the years after by peasants who saw land as unfairly allocated.

Since these market reforms, Việt Nam has promoted land use for industrial development, allowing capital gains to greatly inform the direction of the country. On the grounds of economic growth for the betterment of society, this rhetoric legitimised government policies by favouring an “industrial bias” for land development. The motivation for governments to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) is driven by the desire for profit. State and local officials privilege outward-looking, export-oriented development because of the simple fact that industry brings in far more capital for land conversion than do individual residences or agricultural development. Since 1988, city officials have made major shifts from closed economic policies to ones that create a favourable investment environment opening many sectors of the economy to foreign investment (Reinhardt 1999). Even today, the government is striving to reach its foreign direct investment target of $150 billion this year alone. Attracting foreign direct investment remains a top government priority, says Phan Huu Thang, director general of the Foreign Investment Agency of Việt Nam’s Ministry of Planning: “We would like to send a positive signal to the foreign investor community about the determination of the government in speeding up intensive economic reform and international economic integration process” (De Ramos 2006). Not surprisingly then, widespread agricultural-to-urban land conversion has been underway to make room for industrial growth, which has meant that the “international business community that wanted to be in Vietnam were now present; no one was being restrained from entering” (Freeman 2002: 6; emphasis added).

The transition to a market economy has not only led to economic changes but an almost immediate change in Việt Nam’s built environment (Quang & Kammeier 2002). In too many cases, rapid land conversion has meant villages face the threat of being engulfed into cities and towns by extending the city boundary outwards or through the densification of rural villages that exist outside of cities (Coulthart et al. 2006: 32-33). But not all scholars have been optimistic about the impact of these reforms. Most notably, historian Gabriel Kolko (1997) has been critical about the Vietnamese Communist Party’s lack of foresight into the “human costs of reform” (101), a negative by-product of economic policies. He describes:
When Vietnam’s leaders in 1986 initiated far-reaching political and economic policy changes, they scarcely considered the potentially enormous social and human consequences that abolishing the existing highly organized social security and welfare network could create. They were oblivious to the fact that a growing urban industrial class might produce serious challenges if their basic needs were unmet (101).

His skepticism is not unwarranted as economic changes have had a deep impact on local experiences. Land for residential or agricultural use has been reduced significantly to make room for industrial developments, often displacing locals and driving out small businesses. Local authorities and planners allow those with money to flood into the country at the expense of other areas and other groups. In recent years, rapid economic growth and rapid urbanization have exceeded the state’s ability to effectively manage land conversion, a failure which has meant cities develop in an ad hoc manner. Similar to other Southeast Asian cities, scholars have criticized that spatial changes in Việt Nam’s large cities are attributed mainly to liberalization and export-oriented development rather than organized regional planning (Coulthart et al. 2006; Thanh 2005). The local Vietnamese government’s capacity to manage and implement effective city planning has been criticized for being notoriously inadequate (Anh et al. 2003).

3.2 Urbanization in Việt Nam

Urbanization in Việt Nam has taken place over a long period of time due to war and a sluggish economy that followed. More than one decade after dưới mới, the gross domestic product (GDP) has averaged 7.5% annually and in 2007, reached a ten-year high of 9% GDP (De Ramos 2006). This dramatic economic growth has occurred hand-in-hand with the urbanization process. Changes are not only occurring within cities but also on the edge of cities in Việt Nam. Land has changed in order to adjust to the internal and external demands of the market, and urban fringe regions outside of cities have been transformed by these factors. Approximately 10,000 hectares of agricultural land is transformed to urban use every year in the country – with a large proportion occurring on the urban fringe (Coulthart et al. 2006: 32).

Based on his demographic and geographical studies of Asian metropolitan areas, Terry McGee (1991) argues that the distinction between “rural” and “urban” proves misleading. These categories are false and oversimplifications, clouding our vision of the
city and its surrounding regions. Instead of a pure edge marking the strict boundary between pure categories, another kind of space has emerged in many southeast Asian metropolitan regions, a space characterized by mixed agricultural and non-agricultural land use, multiple forms of employment that are both stable and seasonal, and populated by a fluid population of people with ties to the urban core, people from the countryside, and some people who have ties to both (McGee 1991). To account for this new kind of space, McGee coins the term *desakota region*, which is derived from the Bahasa Indonesia words for “village” (*desa*) and “city” (*kota*) used to describe “the situation where one or more urban cores are located in densely settled peasant rural areas” (1991: 7).

Still, our incessant need to draw boundaries and categorize—whether for administrative purposes or for convenience—is always occurring. The distinctions between “rural” and “urban” made by the city’s governing body imply the existence of a “pure” rural or “pure” urban district. But this imagination is incomplete; real space never truly fits into these neat categories, and people transcend their dichotomies through their acts in every day life, indicating a need to disrupt these binaries and imaginings. Indeed, a paradox remains: these binary categories of rural and urban may be old-fashioned and largely inaccurate but they still inform the way people imagine space (Harms 2007: 126).

Specifically, the site of study, Bình Trị Đông ward in Bình Tân district does not conform to pure categories but rather, is a hybrid space. Its complex mixture and transition from an “outer” rural district to an “inner” city district is captured in the term widely used today, called “peri-urban.” But what exactly is the “peri-urban” or the “urban fringe”? We know that this area is geographically on the edge of the city (“peri” means “outside” and so, “peri-urban” means “outside the city”), yet where it begins and ends outside of the city center is never clear. One important point is that the peri-urban interface (PUI) is not necessarily confined to a geographic region but rather a *set of processes* where urban and rural activities intersect (Tho 2005: 2). These processes, or rural-urban flows, occur when rural areas on the outskirts of cities become more urban in character in physical, economic, and social terms. Sometimes their function remains primarily agricultural while in other cases, rural migrations into peri-urban regions function as temporary holding areas (Browder & Bohland 1995: 311). Echoing McGee’s
characterization, people living on the urban fringe are growing in number and belong to diverse income groups where their livelihoods on one hand, depend on agriculture, and on the other, can be marked by an intensity of urban activities (Brook & Davila 2000). Furthermore, Allen (2003) explains that the peri-urban interface constitutes an “uneasy phenomenon,” usually characterized by either the loss of rural aspects (e.g., agricultural land) or the lack of urban attributes (e.g., low density, lack of services) (135-136). Leaf (2007) has expanded on Allen’s description through the terms “peri-urbanism” or “peri-ruralism”—both implying different types of change. First, peri-urbanism is characterized as involving rapid social change in which small agricultural communities are forced to adjust to a more urban or industrial way of life (Webster 2002: 5). Kirk (2002) advances that peri-urbanism is urban expansion whereby land on the fringe of cities is converted from agricultural to urban uses or from one urban land use to another. By contrast to peri-urbanism, peri-ruralism is whereby an area experiences changes in livelihood activities during periods agrarian transition and intensified rural-urban interaction. This perspective means changes in agrarian production, overall loss of agricultural land and environment degradation are the effects of a decreased level of agricultural labour (Leaf 2007: 7).

Another important feature of peri-urban areas is their heterogeneous social make-up, in which farmers, informal settlers, industrial entrepreneurs, and middle-class commuters, can co-exist in one region. One commonality is that these groups are usually in transition, forced to change and adapt to new actors in their space (Allen 2003). With such diverse groups, people and activities vary widely. Residents can be high and middle-income families moving to “greener” areas; low-income groups moving from central areas for affordable housing; and migrants from both rural and urban areas (Tacoli 1999: 5). Additionally, spatial arrangements are important for forging new patterns of social relationships. Because constant change is a defining characteristic in the peri-urban interface, ranging from urban expansion to the decline of agricultural and rural employment opportunities, different changes also means effective administrative management to handle challenges in these areas is crucial (Allen 2003; Kirk 2002; Davila et al. 1999; Kelly 1998; Coulthart et al. 2006; Webster 2004). Do these new social dynamics have a profound impact on daily life and if so, do they indicate a societal trend
for Việt Nam as a whole? Who are these groups and how have they changed the social fabric of everyday life? These questions will be explored further on in the paper.

3.3 Internal Migration in Việt Nam

Internal migration in Việt Nam has been a focal point of political and social debate for decades. Although gaining greater acceptance under the process of official legislative reform, it is still somewhat a tricky subject. Restricting and monitoring mobility has also been on the state agenda for decades. The Vietnamese government has had a long history of attempting to control the movement of people within the country. During pre-reform Việt Nam, the French colonial government implemented a tax card which permitted travel and a village-issued transfer of residence paper to approve a permanent move. Following the end of the French occupation in 1954, the Vietnamese government instituted household registration forms, called the hổ khẩu which was important for authorities to maintain social order and social organization. The hổ khẩu restricted population movements from not only the North to the South (to escape the strong Communist presence) but also restricted movement into cities. Following the Việt Nam War in 1976, the launch of a collectivization plan whereby inhabitants were pushed into the countryside in order to balance geographic and regional inequalities was carried out. With đổi mới, movement of people occurred on an unprecedented scale. Still, governments tried to combat over-urbanization which meant villagers had to overcome several challenges for entry into the city such as exclusion from social services (e.g., education and healthcare). After more than a decade of state-controlled cooperatives, de-collectivization and dismantling co-operatives in 1988 meant greater freedoms of mobility. In 1993, the Land Law abolished state subsidy systems which meant people no longer depended on government subsidies and rations and so, people had a greater incentive to find work off the farm.

The Vietnamese government currently uses the KT system to categorize residents. The 2004 Migration Survey defines these categories as follows:

KT1 are persons who live in the same place where they are registered;
KT2 are persons who are registered in one district but live in another district;
KT3 are persons who have temporary registration in the city for more than one year (or long-term migrants);
KT4 are persons who have temporary registration for less than one year (or short-term migrants).

For the most part, KT3 and KT4 groups tend to be spontaneous migrants (e.g., not government organized or sponsored). Most recently, the new 2007 Residency Law states that temporary migrants (tạm trú) who have lived in the city for more than one year can apply for residency, which has a direct bearing on the lives and livelihoods of 2.2 million people and their families throughout the country\(^8\) (“Tạm trú 1 năm…”, 2 July 2007: 5). This means that certain rights to the city can now be extended to a greater number of people, such as access to social services, thereby lifting barriers to make the process of migration less difficult.

Institutional changes in the 1980s and 1990s surrounding de-collectivization, land tenure, and a relaxation of the household registration system have been particularly significant in shaping patterns of mobility in Việt Nam (Adger et. al. 2002: 360). One of the most significant results from the economic reforms of đổi mới has been the mobility of people. An increasing influx of people across previously rigid boundaries has created far-reaching spatial and cultural reconfiguration affecting both city and countryside. State regulations that once restricted rural-urban migration through one’s household registration (hộ khẩu) have also become much more relaxed. Since the gradual removal of official barriers, spontaneous internal migration has soared in response to the greater freedom to move into cities. Migration, however, has been experienced by groups very differently in recent years and its repercussions are decidedly mixed. Although the hộ khẩu system is much more liberal, the state has not entirely eliminated direct and indirect restrictions (e.g., social services) on migrant workers to combat the growing fear of over-urbanization.

Despite the unprecedented economic growth there remain many social concerns facing migrants in Việt Nam. Every year, Hồ Chí Minh City receives thousands of migrants into the city who must quickly adapt themselves to the modernity of their urban environment. In the last five years, there has been a substantial increase of migrants to\(^8\)

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\(^8\) The 2006 Residency Law passed through the Parliamentary Assembly on 11 November 2006, became effective 1 July 2007 states that citizens with lawful residence (for those who are living in a city directly under the central government, and have been continuous temporary residents for at least one year) should be considered permanent residents including those who live in rented houses, live with friends, relatives and have the owner’s acceptance document.
the outskirts of the city, or a “transfusion of new blood” to the social, economic, and political fabric of the urban fringe where the cost of living is substantially cheaper. For various groups, migration means a substantial lifestyle change. For instance, with the movement of people comes a new set of interactions and negotiations between daily encounters as well as broader socio-economic changes are emerging.

Although migration has been studied rather extensively in the Vietnamese context, research undertaken has been largely quantitative, dealing with statistical data against a backdrop of larger sociological and economic questions. Research on internal migration in Việt Nam is briefly summarized here:

- Migration is often studied using categories within a sociological framework (Zhang et al. 2001) or quantitative sociological perspective (Loi 2004; Thang 2002; Gubry & Le 2002).

- From a geographical perspective concerning environmental degradation (Allen 2003; Vien et al. 2005).

- From an economic perspective through remittances, strategies of poverty reduction, and income measurements (Deshingkar 2006; Anh et al. 2003; Anh 2005; Adger 2000; Zhang 2001; de Brauw & Harigaya 2007).

- From a social perspective, specifically the importance of social capital measured through quantitative research (Carpenter et al. 2004; Winkels & Adger 2002).

Today in Việt Nam, modern factors are strongly influencing people’s decisions to move. More specifically, the individual’s desire for a cosmopolitan lifestyle seems to be a larger driving force rather than traditional notions of migration as an economic family strategy (Rigg 2006). This is especially salient for the younger generation. Family strategies of migration still play a significant role yet Bình Trị Đông ward is unique in that it receives a large number of young, single migrants whose decision to move is largely self-initiated and drawn by a more urban appeal in addition to the new social interactions that are created (this will be discussed further in Chapter 5). As I have tried to illustrate in this chapter, economic reforms, urbanization, and migration occurred on an unprecedented scale since 1986. These three processes are also linked together, occurring hand-in-hand and reinforcing each other. I will move onto changes on a smaller local scale in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Site-Specific Analyses

This section is designed to offer a more detailed understanding of the area in which my research took place, on a city-level and neighborhood-level. The challenges of city expansion and infrastructure provisions in the form of housing in Bình Trị Đông and Hồ Chí Minh City will be explored here before I move on to exploring the social relationships that characterize it (in chapter 5). The aim of this section is therefore to use a combination of statistical data combined with observations and discussions with local landowners and government officials in order to offer a better understanding of the area.

4.1 Hồ Chí Minh City

Although my field research was carried out exclusively in Bình Trị Đông ward of Bình Tân district, this area must be understood within a wider context of the greater city itself. Indeed, it is essential to understand how the ward fits into larger linkages to the city and countryside. And so, this section provides background information about Hồ Chí Minh City. As of December 2006, the administrative zone of Hồ Chí Minh City consists of 24 districts in which 19 are classified as “urban” and 5 are “rural”:

- **19 urban districts (quận):** Districts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, Bình Tân, Tân Bình, Bình Thạnh, Phú Nhuận, Thủ Đức, Tân Phú and Gò Vấp
- **5 rural districts (huyện):** Bình Chánh, Nhà Bè, Căn Giờ, Hóc Môn, and Củ Chi

Urban districts are also called nội or “inner districts” whereas rural districts are referred to as ngoại or “outer districts.” According to the official Hồ Chí Minh City website, urban districts consist of 259 wards (phường) while rural districts are made up of 58 communes (xã) and 5 townships (thị trấn)\(^9\). Yet, here is an uneven population distribution where 90% of the population of the city lives in urban districts while the remaining 10% are in rural districts (Le 2006: 4), creating even greater challenges for urban management in the form of resource competition and infrastructure provisions. As previously mentioned, getting too comfortable with these rural and urban or inner and outer categories is never a good thing. The government is always classifying and re-classifying boundaries, amalgamating, dividing, and creating new areas. Since geographic boundaries are always drawn and re-drawn, people can move from being

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\(^9\) The official website for Hồ Chí Minh City is [www.hochiminhcity.gov.vn](http://www.hochiminhcity.gov.vn).
“rural” in an “outer” district to being “urban” in an “inner” district overnight. Such is the case of Bình Tân district which changed from rural to urban in 2003 which has social and political implications for administering the city and thinking about one’s place in the city.

Movements of people into the city have occurred at an unprecedented rate. Many rural migrants seeking better opportunity have settled in and around Hồ Chí Minh City—the economic powerhouse of Việt Nam—yet many also settle on the outskirts where the cost of living is much lower. According to the October 2004 Census, the city has a population of seven million including the unregistered migrant population (Anh 2005: 3). At an annual growth rate of 3.6%, the number of residents is expected to reach 8 million in 2020 and up to 10.9 million in 2030 with no sign of slowing down (Gubry & Le 2002: 13). With a surface area of 2,094 km² Hồ Chí Minh City is densely populated with 9,450 people per km², making it the 20th most densely populated city in the world, ahead of the notoriously crowded Mexico City.¹⁰

There are approximately 30 wards in Hồ Chí Minh City where more than half of the population are migrants, and in residential areas adjacent to industrial parks, such as Tân Tạo in Bình Tân district, migrants make up 70% of the population. This has translated into infrastructure pressures as well as disorders and confusion in local people’s lives both economically and culturally (Le 2006: 4).

The increasing social-cultural diversity of Hồ Chí Minh City continues to offer a safe destination for sojourners, attracting migrants who travel great distances to find work in this city. Statistics in Table 4.1 shows the number of migrants from northern areas has steadily increased in the last decade:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red River Delta</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Centre</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Coast</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Highlands</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Highlands</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Population Census 1999 and mid-2004 (c.f. Le 2006: 5)

¹⁰ For more information about city rankings, visit www.citymayors.com/statistics/largest-cities-density-125.html.
Not only has this large movement played an integral role in the formation of the city, but how government is responding to these changes has serious implications for the future development of Hồ Chí Minh City.

In the 1990s, existing infrastructure and services could not cope with the increased demand from a growing population and rapid economic growth. Management to handle urbanization was unfocused and haphazard and thus largely ineffective. Today, one cannot help but notice Hồ Chí Minh City’s dizzying pace. Hồ Chí Minh City is full of activity and somewhat chaotic: a high population density, a large number of commuters in and out of the city on a daily basis and a high concentration of industries pose a fundamental infrastructure challenge. Growth is rapidly occurring at the peri-urban fringes of cities in Việt Nam and although plans are debated, drawn up, there is still the problem of implementation as most urban fringe areas lack adequate infrastructure. The New Master Plan of Hồ Chí Minh City in 1993 was designed to handle the city’s urban challenges by repairing infrastructure, generating employment, preserving the environment, providing new land for housing, industry, and planning new transportation routes to manage rapid urban change (Ha & Wong 1999: 305). The Plan also targeted developing fringe areas through economic growth served by an expansion of traffic, proposing green belts on the fringe that act as a protective circle to prevent uncontrolled sprawl. The problem of slow implementation means people are usually left to find any means to survive and governments are then forced to find immediate solutions to long-standing problems. Retro-fitting infrastructure into unplanned developments is much more expensive than constructing it as an integral part of city plans (Coulthart et al. 2006), yet is how the government responds to problems.

4.2 Site of Research: Bình Trị Đông Ward

Bình Trị Đông ward in Bình Tân district of Hồ Chí Minh City was selected as a site of study because of the rapid social and economic changes occurring in this area. Once largely uninhabited, recent industrial activity has meant that this district has undergone the urbanization of communes into wards. As one of the 19 urban districts in HCMC, quận Bình Tân was separated from huyện Bình Chánh on 1 December 2003. Bình Trị Đông ward is further divided into areas A, B, and C. Located west of the city
center, this region is home to a growing number of industrial enterprises. Because of its strategic geographical location to the city and countryside, goods are transported through this district between the Mekong Delta and Hồ Chí Minh City (Tho 2005: 1) where the location of Bình Tân district plays an important role for the city.

Bình Trị Đông is a residential zone connected to an industrial zone, fostering a stronger link between workers and their place of employment. Located adjacent to Bình Trị Đông is Tân Tảo industrial park (khu công nghiệp), the largest industrial park in the city, employing 20,000 workers in its 183 factories. The sheer number of people entering Pou Chen Việt Nam Enterprise Limited, a 68 hectare textile factory hidden behind brick walls and wire fences, is astonishing. Before or after working hours one can see a flood of workers in the same brightly coloured uniforms, forming a sea of busy bodies rushing in and out of the confines of the walled community. It is logical then, that this area functions as a “buffer zone,” receiving many migrants who treat this area as a “transitional” space to satisfy their economic goals based on the high availability of jobs. This has helped to create prospects to spur socioeconomic development in Bình Tân district and as a result, pressures from urbanization in this area are becoming increasingly great.

Mrs. Yen (D.O.1) [see Appendix I], Vice Chairwoman of the entire Bình Tân district (her official title in Vietnamese is Phó Chánh Văn Phòng UBND Quận Bình Tân), explains the unique social demographics that are shaping this area. Not only is Bình Tân receiving a lot of migrants from other provinces, but what makes this area different from many others is the “reverse” flow of migration with people from the city center moving from the “inside out” to capitalize on the cheap availability of land. She cites two main reasons for this. First, large-scale infrastructure projects (for instance, the East-West Highway) have displaced people from city centers, pressuring them to find settlements elsewhere. Secondly, larger families living in the city core are now splitting into smaller families and buying land at a lower price here. For instance, she says, selling a house in the city will give one family enough income to buy two or three nicer and larger homes in

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12 All interviewees in this thesis have been given a pseudonym. Following their pseudonym, the code in parentheses corresponds to a code found in Appendix I that provides more background information about the informant.
Figure 4.1: Closer view of Bình Tân district surrounded by District 6 to the east, District 8 to the South, and Bình Chánh commune to the west and southwest

Source: unknown
Bình Tân. Both factors have applied greater pressure on officials to improve the local infrastructure to accommodate the bi-directional flow of people from rural-to-urban and from urban-to-urban.

Bình Trị Đông is very accessible. The ward has two main roads—Đường số 7 and Tỉnh Lộ 10—that act as gateways into neighbouring District 6 to its east. To the west, Tỉnh Lộ 10 connects to Đì Quốc Lộ 1, the trans-national highway of Việt Nam which leads into the Mekong Delta and connects surrounding provinces (see Figure 4.2). This area still lacks urban facilities such as adequate road development. Heavily congested, these two roads have yet to be paved which means they are characterized by a series of uneven mixtures of gravel terrain and patches of dirt. Branching off from these two main roads are smaller roads whose state of disrepair is quite immediate. For instance, even after days without rain, rows of deep puddles approximately four or five meters in diameter will still be filled with water. This presents a logistical problem for pedestrians and drivers alike. The only solution is to manoeuvre around them, careful not to splash yourself or others around you. On rainy days or during rush hour, avoiding these massive puddles is nearly impossible.

Figure 4.2: A small residential area in Bình Trị Đông with its gravel roads and uninhabited fields in the distance
Source: Own collection

26
From such tremendous industrial growth in the entire Bình Tân district, Bình Trị Đông ward has also attracted large and medium-sized factories throughout the area. Main streets have a combination of stores, individual private homes, single-level nhà trọ, multi-level nhà trọ, stores, vendors, restaurants, and interestingly enough, nhà cho thuê (called motels in English) that offer room rentals by the hour. The function of nhà cho thuê is different from khách sạn (or hotels) in that their rental rate is per hour whereas a khách sạn is calculated per day. Each room in a nhà cho thuê can be rented out for 50,000 Vietnamese đồng (VND) per hour (or $5 USD). When I asked a local resident who usually rents them out, he snickered and explained that they were private rooms for young people in “quan hệ phức tạp” (or a “romantic relationship” in English). His mother, giving her 31-year old son a look of disapproval, corrected that their purpose was for temporary migrants who came into the city for short periods of time and need short-term housing. A senior researcher later clarified that nhà cho thuê have several functions: as inexpensive motels for business people, temporary housing for short-term migrant workers, and as private rooms for young people in romantic relationships. Still, its existence in the area has risen in response to the demand by migrants.

Socially and culturally, this space has been transformed. People here are generally young migrants or young families most of whom work in factories. Data from Luong (1999: 3) found that a large percentage of migrants in Bình Trị Đông were not based on nuclear bonds (14.9%) compared to other inner-city districts, as well as a disproportionate number of young people under the age of 35. This area is therefore a safe destination for many single migrants to move here for work in factories that prefer to hire younger workers. Others find employment in the informal sector, selling mainly small articles in their households or markets, jobs that do not require high education and little vocational skill (Le 1999: 4). This area is busiest during the early morning and late afternoon and virtually a ghost town in the middle of the day. There is a lot of activity on Sundays and evenings until shops and restaurants close around 9 pm in order to open early the next morning. According to a survey of Bình Trị Đông, the social composition

\[13\] In English, this translates into “a complicated relationship” which is an indirect Vietnamese expression for referring to a “romantic” or “sexual” relationship. Although beyond the scope of this paper, scholars are observing a “quiet” sexual revolution unfolding in Viêt Nam characterized by more liberal sexual attitudes and behaviours. For more general information, please see http://www.reuters.com/article/inDepthNews/idUSSP3184420070711.
4.2.1. Somewhere in Between the Rural and the Urban

But land use in Bình Trị Đồng is not strictly industrial nor is it urbanized, and its re-categorization as an “urban” district continues to be highly misleading. Despite the rapid rural-to-urban transition in this area, more than 70% (252 km$^2$) of the land in 1999 was still considered “agrarian” in which agriculture activities still plays a key role (Le 1999: 2). Still, the overall agricultural activities and agricultural land has decreased, indicating the process of peri-ruralism unfolding here. For instance, 85% of the population worked in the agricultural sector before the 1990s\(^{14}\). With spatial and social change from urbanization, there has been a shift in land use. Between 1995-2002 however, the availability of agricultural land decreased from 840 hectares to only 100 hectares in addition to a population increase of *six times* to 77,000 residents in 2003 (Hoa 2004: 7; Luong 2005: 165).

Although an “urban” district (*quận*), Bình Trị Đồng ward should not be strictly viewed as an area of urban expansion outwards. Rather, the area is being populated by rural migrants moving inwards who continue to engage in rural practices, thus transforming this space into an “urban village,” in which agricultural activities still play a significant role and should be integrated into the urban economy in strengthening rural-urban linkages (“The 2004 Migration Survey,” 2004: 41). Some areas are denser than others, characterized by their labyrinth of tiny paths which lead to many houses built closely together, but also more sparse areas in which houses are built several hundred meters away from each other. In between some houses or shops are vacant plots of marshy land, swamps, and lotus ponds. Here, there is some sign that locals are trying to preserve their old habits from the countryside. It would not be uncommon to see cows freely roaming these areas or households engaging in “rural” activities, such as drying rows of salted fish or harvesting crops. These areas can support small-scale farming activities as well as industrial production, a fact not always recognized because of the

\(^{14}\) Please note that these figures are taken from Bình Trị Đồng when it was still a part of *huyện* Binh Chánh.
government’s heavy industrial bias. Often, rapid land conversion usually means villages face the threat of being engulfed into cities and towns as extensions of the metropolis or through the densification of rural villages (Coulthart et al. 2006: 33).

Although Bình Tân has been re-classified as an inner-city district in 2003, this simplified category offers little insight into the complex changes occurring in this mixed residential, agricultural, and industrial area. This new mixed zone of multiple occupational activities and mixed land use continues to challenge the usefulness of rural and urban categories. It still, however, has not prevented the government from preserving these categories and insisting on a particular type of development based on such distinctions. In 1995, then President Võ Văn Kiệt complained that urban areas, a marker of modernity, were still administered in the same way that the countryside was administered. He spoke about the need to modernize the administration of urban areas and the need to maintain the distinction between the urban and rural zones by implementing new administrative measures:

The organizational model for the government machinery in urban areas today is no different than the organization of that machinery in the rural districts and communes ... this situation cannot continue ... We are carrying out the Industrialization and Modernization of the country, but if we do not regularize urban administration, the above goals can never be reached. It is necessary to have proficiency in administration, and also to modernize the level of administration, so as not to allow the evil of bureaucracy to become a fertile ground for the evil of harassing and pestering all the people (c.f. Tuổi Trẻ, 7 July 1995 in Harms 2007: 85-86).

Implicit in his speech is the tendency to categorize, but that categories are essential for drawing clear distinctions: that city and country are different and require different forms of administration and thus need to be kept separate. Douglass (1998) argues that this form of urban management is outdated and that institutions should no longer be bound to their rural and urban frameworks. These dichotomies are no longer useful in modern society given the flows of people, information, capital, commodities that permeate across boundaries. He argues that overcoming this rural-urban divide in planning means overcoming abandoning a rural bias or urban bias and adopting a regional network strategy incorporating rural-urban linkages and interdependencies. These challenges of rural-urban linkages will be addressed further in Chapter 5.
4.3 Housing Challenges

Another consideration in my research is migrant housing in Bình Trị Đông. Why is housing important? Because one’s living arrangements have a direct bearing on one’s social relationships. In the case of migrants, housing has an enormous symbolic value because it represents integration in the city and research indicates that it may be more valuable than employment (“Poverty Alleviation…” 1999: 4). More specifically, living conditions and the use of private space influences relationships: treating one’s living space as either temporary or permanent will have different implications on how social relationships are conceived.

Since 1986, housing and housing policies have started to change. The government began encouraging the building of private houses in Hồ Chí Minh City (Tran 2004a: 1), and what occurred was the growth of new homes throughout cities. The newly-born private housing sector is the largest housing supplier, yet is still not enough to keep up with the growing number of residents. Even an increase in urban land by converting huyện into quận, which meant an expansion of the city, did not increase the average land per capita and because home building did not catch up with population growth (Tran 2004a: 5).

The 1993 Master Plan tackled housing but insufficiently projected only 190,940 units for 705,650 people. Table 4.2 below shows that the state fund for housing was less than one-third of the total required fund, and lack of resources leaves the problem of housing shortages inadequately addressed. Poor groups are left to their own devices and often live in unplanned and unregulated self-built settlements, usually along the city’s periphery where the standard of living is lower. The “housing crisis” in Việt Nam is directly observable to anyone who has wandered the streets of Hồ Chí Minh City. Lack of government support, rising property costs in cities, and increased competition for space have all led to the emergence of illegal settlements and thus make it increasingly difficult for low-income groups to solve housing problems (Durand-Lasserver 1998). Figures from 1999 cited 150,000 temporary dwellings, 43,000 dilapidated houses, and 24,000 slum houses mainly located along the canals and small rivers in Hồ Chí Minh City (“Urban Development…” 1999: 87), a figure that has likely gone up in recent years. In fact, statistics indicate a disturbing trend that the number of people in informal, insecure
settlements is *increasing faster* than the total urban population (c.f. Payne 2006 in Kirk 2002: 9; emphasis added). These informal settlements are a symptom of Hồ Chí Minh City’s metropolization and a lack of infrastructure means vulnerable groups have greater social and environmental repercussions (Wust et al. 2002: 214).

### Table 4.2: Housing Provision of the HCMC Master Plan, 1994-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Projects</th>
<th>Land area (ha)</th>
<th>Housing units</th>
<th>Estimated residents (persons)</th>
<th>Total Investment (billion VND)</th>
<th>State budget (billion VND)</th>
<th>Other sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>256</td>
<td>4,519.3</td>
<td>190,940</td>
<td>705,650</td>
<td>23,010.6</td>
<td>5,485.1</td>
<td>18,282.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: The Office of the Chief Architect of Hồ Chí Minh City: The Master Plan 1996*

Moreover, the responsibility of providing adequate housing is still being passed off from one authority to another. With a few exceptions, companies almost never provide affordable housing for employees. There is a lack of policy incentives encouraging investment on rental housing for workers in industrial parks (Van 2006: 4). This is slowly changing, according to housing solutions proposed by the Department of Construction in Hồ Chí Minh City. The city government has made some steps to finding low-income housing so residents do not have to resort to informal housing solutions. For instance, the Ministry of Construction is pressuring the National Assembly to pass the 2006 Housing Law which includes, among others, incentives for companies and governments to collectively finance low-cost housing as well as to attract investment capital to rebuild dilapidated apartment houses (Hiep 2006). Although a step in the right direction, housing is still an urgent issue for the majority of the poor.

Attitudes towards informal solutions are changing. According to my conversations with Mr. Lê Chánh Kien (D.O.2), the Vice Chairman of Bình Trị Đông ward (*Phó Chủ tịch Quận Bình Tri Đông*), planning institutions and local governments have very tolerant attitudes toward informal housing as the only way to provide shelter for the poor. Although a portion of private housing construction is undertaken without official land right certificates and without building permits, it is officially recognized by the government (Quang & Kammeier 2002: 383). Today, financial punishment is not enough to deter people from constructing homes and the government has modified to consider these forms of housing. Formal recognition of informal houses are now being
recognized by an official house number and no longer perceived as “illegal” houses, Mr. Kien referred to them as “phạt, cho tồn tại” or literally, “punished-exist,” a term to capture its hybrid existence.

The question of housing always means a question of housing standards and acceptable living conditions. Although houses are rapidly being built, current housing conditions are still an urgent and complicated social issue. The Ministry of Construction (MOC) is administratively responsible for urban planning of the city but residents themselves are responsible for improving their own homes. Still, there continues to be an absence of specific construction standards for low-cost housing which means the obligation to upgrade and improve housing rests entirely on private landowners. If they choose to upgrade (which many do in order to maintain their competitive edge), this is a private matter and the state has no jurisdiction to interfere. But because there is no obligation or minimal standard for housing, the issue of adequate housing remains largely unresolved and the living conditions of some poor groups remain dismal.

4.4 Migrant Dormitories in Bình Trị Đông

Migrants live in a diverse mixture of housing in the city. These range from poorly constructed informal settlements, to renting a room within a home, to rental dormitories, to owning a home. Groups of interest in this research are migrants living in rental dormitories, called nhà trọ in Vietnamese, and this type of housing is a relatively new addition to the city’s landscape. Only recently, the marshy fields of Bình Trị Đông have been transformed by urban intensification. With population increase, the housing demand is quite high, giving rise to private investment in nhà trọ and the construction of migrant dormitories has since become very profitable. In Bình Trị Đông, there is a distinct pattern of nhà trọ housing in this area: one level nhà trọ are the most common form but as more migrants settle here, some landowners have added upper floors. According to statistics from the Vice Chairman of Bình Trị Đông, there are a total of 542 households living in nhà trọ including 596 rooms for rent with 12,801 occupants in Bình Trị Đông “A” alone. These figures are much higher for the entire ward.
One immediately visible difference of the physical landscape in Bình Trị Đông compared to other peri-urban areas (such as quận Gò Vấp or huyện Hóc Môn) is the presence of multi-level nhà trọ. Most migrant dormitories throughout the city are usually low-level buildings that rarely exceed two stories. Here in Bình Trị Đông, construction of some nhà trọ can be quite sophisticated. These massive complexes of nhà trọ in which the building can reach five stories high to house individual dormitories are becoming more and more common. Some can house up to 500 migrants with three or four people to a room as small as 3 meters x 3 meters. Front entrances of these buildings are quite spacious where the landlords usually use this area to set up a small shop for selling candy, cold drinks, and other assorted items.

Research shows that housing conditions in Bình Trị Đông are deteriorating marked by a decrease in the average living area (Tran 2004b: 6-7). A lifestyle trade-off is made by migrants who move here. Housing, even low quality and high density, is seen as a means to an end and so many are willing to tolerate their living conditions. After all, the goal of migration into big cities is to make as much money as possible and to minimize expenses, which means high density and lack of privacy is tolerated because the most important factor at this stage is to accumulate capital (Tran 2004b: 11). Or more accurately put, “It is better to be poor in the city than rich in the countryside” (c.f. Dang 1998 in Guest 2004: 9). Even among long-term migrants who have been here for more than a decade, poor housing conditions do not seem to be a significant factor. Most migrants I spoke to were quite optimistic about their living space. From my discussions, many migrants tell me that their landlords have been rather good with repairs and upgrading, such as installing new metal doors to replace old ones. This optimism (or indifference) can be related to the fact that most migrants I spoke to intend to return to their quê eventually; some, but only a small number, planned to own their own home one day and so were trying to reduce expenses.

In terms of ownership, landowners purchase plots of land and construct a low-level building that consists of at least five dormitory rooms or wealthier owners build larger high-rise buildings that can house up to several hundred migrants. Most rooms are well-built cement homes with ceramic tile floors. Each room has its own electricity and water system; some rooms have holes in the floor that serve as toilets while others rely on
Figure 4.3: View outside a single-storey nhà trọ building complex in Bình Trị Đông
Source: Own collection

Figure 4.4: Left and Right: View of the sleeping area inside a single-storey nhà trọ shared by 3 young adults.
Source: Own collection
communal toilets in central courtyards. Windows are small and so ventilation is quite poor. Each room is an average of 3 meters x 3 meters which hold upwards of four people who must compete for space to wash, clean, cook, and sleep. Privacy and space are limited but not a problem given that space is a luxury for Vietnamese people and so this is not perceived as a big inconvenience or a violation of privacy, according to most informants. Roommates are family or extended relatives, co-workers, friends, romantic partners, but rarely strangers. The majority of the physical space is taken up by personal belongings: clothing, toiletries, kitchen items, electronics, and so on. About half the rooms have televisions and DVD players. At night, each person sleeps next to the other on the floor or using bamboo mats, leaving little space for anything else. Motorbikes and bicycles are kept locked in the hallway outside.

From what I gathered from landowners, I am unclear if they were lamenting the construction of migrant houses or celebrating them. Several informants I spoke to, both migrants and landowners, frequently mentioned the dramatic change in physical landscape. Many told me that nhà trọ did not exist a decade ago. One urban landowner (L.O.1), who claims to have been living here for over 10 years, says that renting out his nhà trọ is becoming increasingly difficult because of competing dormitories that are cheaper and newer. He boasts that his nhà trọ was one of the very first dormitories ever built here and in the past did not go more than one month of vacancy. Nowadays, he says, migrants are always moving in and out of his dormitory because they will find cheaper accommodations as close as next door, making it increasingly difficult for him to sustain consistent renters and causing him bị nhức đầu (to suffer from a headache). The monthly rent may differ by 20,000 to 30,000 VND (or $2 to $3 USD), yet is a cost renters are unwilling to absorb. He said that although there is a wider variety of choice between the different nhà trọ, the price of land has risen so significantly that he cannot imagine building a nhà trọ today.

Another landowner (L.O.2) I spoke to was rather conflicted about his feelings. He moved to Bình Trị Đông eight years ago, where he and his sisters invested in building a 10-room nhà trọ next to his home. He is an urbanite, born and raised in District 6, and moved here to purchase a home where the price of land was substantially cheaper. For 350,000 VND per room, his family’s nhà trọ makes 3,500,000 VND per month (or $350
Figure 4.5: View of a two-level nhà trọ from the outside
Source: Own collection

Figure 4.6: View of second level in a nhà trọ. This area is 2 meters x 2 meters and is primarily used for sleeping
Source: Own collection
USD). Although he profits handsomely, his sister tells me that he dislikes northern migrants and he frequently mock their accent and complain that they làm phiền him (which means “disturb” in English) with their complaints.

Another local urbanite (L.O.3), a 47-year old man who claims to have been living here for over twenty years, is rather happy about the change in his local environment. With a 38-room nhà trọ located next door to his family’s large home, he laughs when we joke that he is a “rich man.” I would often see him at all hours of the day drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes with his friends in a nearby café. He handles any problems with his dormitories with a calm smile. Despite his handsome profits, he always makes time to repair various electrical or plumbing problems in his nhà trọ. He explains that he taught himself these skills years ago to avoid hiring someone to do the work for him. Many migrants in his nhà trọ tell me they have established a good rapport and are quite fond of him.

We can see that the different forces that shape the built environment, and specifically, migrant housing, play an integral role in the area. In discussing the urban landscape, what must be carefully considered are not only rural migrants but also the
perspective of landowners—many of whom are urbanites from other districts or are native to the area. Their motivation for staying here is largely from the financial incentives of making money from their nhà trọ. A landowner’s actions, whether by building, modifying, or doing nothing to their nhà trọ has the power to largely inform the migrants’ living arrangements thus influencing the spatial and social landscape of the area. In other words, their decisions directly influence the surrounding environment which influences the social relationships among migrants. For instance, deciding not to upgrade decreases the monthly rate of their dormitories, thereby attracting poorer groups. The positive or negative experiences between migrants and landowners also affect the social atmosphere of the area. My discussions indicate that the landowner-migrant relationship is generally mutually respectful largely because homeowners live right next to their nhà trọ (which is a common feature in this area) so proximity and contact mean relationships must remain reciprocal. Housing conditions and minimum standards, although perhaps a problem in other parts of the city, are generally not an issue due to the high availability of nhà trọ and low rental rates (approximately 300,000 - 400,000 VND per month or $30 - $40 USD) compared to other areas. This affordability also translates into fewer slum settlements throughout the area. And because of market competition, the pressures to maintain decent living conditions of these rooms mean their upkeep is generally quite good. Living arrangements and the actors who shape these arrangements allow us to understand the larger picture of one’s spatial environment in this neighbourhood before moving onto the life stories of the migrants who characterize the area.
Chapter 5: Migrant Life Stories

5.1 Introduction

In the literature, one finds the tendency to clump heterogeneous migrant groups into a homogenous category of the “economically dispossessed” or “marginalized” groups often overlooking the diverse sub-groups and internal dynamics that exist within these convenient categories. Migrants cannot be generalized; they have different values, perceptions, life experiences, and goals, which affect the friendships and other relationships they forge. In discussing migration patterns in Việt Nam, there is a substantial amount of literature surrounding the driving forces behind this process, namely globalization and industrialization, while research into how these changes are affecting relationships between individuals and groups is somewhat limited. Since it is people who make up the neighborhood, understanding their stories from their own perspective provides insights into finer dynamics. As geographer David Harvey (1989) rightly asserts, it is impossible to study the role of urbanization without engaging in a deeper enquiry of social change (3).

That being said, my qualitative research was intended to shed greater insight into the social dynamics of migrants in a highly industrialized peri-urban area of Hồ Chí Minh City. This section is devoted to understanding the social experiences of everyday life on the urban fringe of Bình Trị Đông. Interpersonal relationships, social bonds, and community among migrants in Bình Trị Đông are discussed here in order to provide further insights into the social relationships among migrants. The aim of this section is therefore to fill in the gaps in our understanding of migrants’ social interactions and government policies in Bình Trị Đông in the context of economic and social liberalization. Here I will offer narratives based on individual life stories which make readers more sensitive to the details and linkages beyond a macro perspective. In short, what is it like to live on the margins of the city? To answer this question, it is important to devote a section to the main actors and key individuals who shape this narrative. In this chapter, I have made my best effort to transcribe their stories faithfully.
5.2 Targeted Populations

Migrants, urban landowners, landless urbanites, migrant landowners, and government officials in Bình Trị Đông ward were interviewed. Approximately 35 migrants living in nhà trọ were interviewed, approximately ten urbanites, two government officials, plus a large number of people with whom I had daily interactions with. The selection criteria of migrants were based on a number of characteristics:

- Migrants had to be over the age of 19.
- Migrants must have been living in Bình Trị Đông for over five years\(^{15}\).
- Migrants holding the following hồ khẩu:
  - KT3 hồ khẩu (long-term migrants living in the city for over one year) or;
  - KT4 hồ khẩu (short-term migrants who had been here for over five years but had not renewed their hồ khẩu from KT4 to KT3) or;
  - Migrants without hồ khẩu (did not have official registration papers)\(^{16}\)

5.3 Social Relationships

Questions of how migrants relate to others are central to this research and give us clues into the social connectivity among individuals. The broad question of this specific section is: How do migrants relate to each other and how do they experience their social relationships? When informants were asked who they socialized with, and the type of interactions they had with migrants and non-migrants, many alluded to the casual nature of their relationships. Although migrants live in very close physical proximity to others in nhà trọ, this by no means facilitates relationships.

“Of course my relationships in the city are not as strong compared to my quê. The living standards are higher here but my ‘tinh thần’ [spirit] is low because my family is so far away. In my village I had people to laugh and talk with. Here, I am missing those connections.” (A1).

“I don’t laugh the same as I did in southern Quảng Trị province. When I am happy or sad, I hold those feelings back because I don’t have people to share it with except for my boyfriend. But when he is not here, I speak with my co-workers, but not much.” (B2)

“My relationships are bình thường [normal] but not close.” (C3)

\(^{15}\) It was necessary to decide on a minimum stay of five years in Bình Trị Đông because length of time in one location affects social relationships.

\(^{16}\) By “without papers,” this means that some residents are without any form of official state recognition of their lives. Not only does the hồ khẩu track the movement of people, it is also a means of identification. Births, deaths, marriages, and migration all require registration. If someone’s birth is not declared, they would not be officially recognized. This had huge implications in the past as it excluded these people from claiming rights to social services. (Hardy 2001: 191-192). Still, people without registration have developed creative strategies in order to survive in cities. A very detailed historical explanation of the hồ khẩu is provided by Andrew Hardy (2001) in “Rules and Resources: Negotiating the Household Registration System in Vietnam under Reform.” Sojourn, 16(2): 187-212.
“I don’t have close friends here... Buôn quá!”  (English translation is “too sad!”) One interviewee repeated this phrase four times during a 45-minute interview. (D4)

One informant, who has been living in Bình Trị Đong for almost six years, still has frequent bouts of homesickness and speaks of her loneliness:

“Sometimes when my roommate is out, I will cry by myself. I am so sad to be separated from my loved ones. When my roommate comes back and asks me why I have been crying, I do not want to tell her about how I feel. I don’t think it is important to her.”  (E5)

Another theme emerged suggesting that financial stability in the city cannot compensate for sentimental feelings of attachment and belonging in the quê:

“When you gain one thing you lose another thing. In my situation, I gained financial stability but I lost my close ties with my family and friends.”  (F6)

“The quality of life is better in terms of economics and knowledge. In the city, I have the opportunity to learn new things. But in terms of social relationships, they are not strong.”  (G7)

“I feel well-established here. I have a better mực sống [living standard]: a higher income, a better job, and can send money back home to help my family. But there is very little communication between myself and those around me.”  (H8)

“In general, no place can compare to the quê. I work and feel stable here, but I have no close friends or family.”  (I9)

Even with major events, such as a wedding, death, or a child’s first birthday, migrants mainly invite people from their village or co-workers. Only a few neighbours are invited. To celebrate her child’s first birthday, one migrant told me that she took the overnight train with her husband and child to her husband’s native village in the northern province of Quang Bình:

“I don’t want to stay here. First birthdays are a time of celebration and fun. If I stay, my husband and I will not enjoy myself and that gives bad luck to my family. I prefer to be with my husband’s family even if we have to travel far.”  (J10)

But there are some who do make efforts to reach out to others in their immediate surroundings. The most common form of recreation outside their homes are walking,

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17 This common Vietnamese term, buôn refers to feelings of sadness and/or boredom.
chatting, or having something to eat or drink. They see this as an effort to strengthen their social bonds:

“I prepare cake and invite my neighbours to eat.” (K11)

“On Sundays I have time off from work. I sometimes go to the coffee shop with my friends. But not all the time. It’s too expensive.” (L12)

“When it is too hot in the room, I go outside and sit with my friends. We talk about work. If it is raining outside, we can watch TV or DVD’s in their room.” (M13)

“I feel acquainted with them. When I have free time I will go to my neighbour’s room and watch television or listen to karaoke. I will drink tea with my landlord. But I do not feel close to them. I cannot tell them my problems.” (N14)

Some, however, make a deliberate effort to avoid others:

“I am not worried about being without friends. I have my husband who takes care of fixing the motorbike or lifting anything heavy. We have each other. I almost never ask for help from anyone else.” (O15)

“There are too many rumours around here... When I leave, who I leave with, when I return...Everything you say and do is discussed among people who don’t know you. These people have too much free time and discuss other people’s affairs. So I try to keep to myself. I don’t want to give others more to talk about.” (P16)

Relations may be friendly during a certain period of time but lasting relationships after a move, for example, were not maintained:

“I had one friend who lived next door to me. But she moved back to her quê last year and we have not kept in contact...I try to be self-sufficient. I find people cannot help me so I try to rely on myself.” (E5)

“When I lived in Bình Thạnh district, my landlord and I became good friends. But when I moved here, we rarely visit each other. If I need help, I will ask her but she is busy with her family so I do not ask often.” (Q17)

“My co-workers are mainly from the north. We will have coffee or breakfast before work, but we rarely see each other after work or on Sundays.” (A1)

As shown, there are different levels of social connectedness but for the most part, relationships are rather distant with a general feeling of indifference and even avoidance of others. Migrants who did feel connected to others engaged in activities that involved social interaction over a short period of time: light-hearted chatting or watching
television, but only briefly and after other more pressing demands (e.g., work and family) were met. Generally, people were not interested in cultivating relationships, existing relationships tend to be distant and this was true for migrants who had been living here for many years. From my research, duration of stay had little effect on cultivating relationships.

5.4 Helping Behaviour

Most people who come from rural areas find adjustment to the big city life rather overwhelming, yet establishing strong social networks to family seems to offer a level of comfort especially during times of need. To offer insights into their social networks, a series of questions on helping behaviour and social support gave a better sense of people’s social support group. In times of financial or emotional crisis, who they turned to and who helped is particularly revealing about their relationships.

One 39-year old woman who works in a small noodle shop who has been here for almost ten years told me:

“I rely mainly on relatives back in Đồ Ngô Thap for financial help. My cousin [who lives in Hóc Môn commune outside of the city] helped me register my daughter for school...My landlord also helped us register my daughter in school by allowing us to use his hô khẩu. But my neighbours don’t provide help: they are only acquaintances. They will ask me for advice about work since I have been here longer and I will have conversations with them. But I don’t feel close to them. We don’t visit each other...I will speak with them if I see them at the market or on the street, but nothing more.” (R18)

“Others here mostly ask me to fill out forms. Last month I helped my neighbours vote when they were at work. But these are normal requests. People will ask me for simple tasks. And I will help them usually. But they know very little about me. And I don’t know very much about them.” (S19)

“Sáng đi tối về [or in English: “leave in the morning and return at night”].18 I have no time to make new friends. I don’t think about these things. If I have any problems, I just ask my co-workers. They will help me just as I will help them, but if they do not want to, that’s fine. But I don’t feel sad about it.” (B2)

“In the city, my wife and I must rely only on each other.” (M13)

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18 In Vietnamese, “sáng đi tối về” literally means to “leave in the morning and return at night.” This expression is used to convey one’s busy and difficult lifestyle. It bears a negative connotation that implies that because their lives are largely consumed by work with little time for rest or leisure activities.
“When I was sick, I could not go to work. Only my co-workers came to visit me at home. They brought me cháo lòng (congee) and medicine. But only my co-workers.” (T20)

“I don’t really have anyone to help. In times of sickness, no one comes to see me. When I am sick, my roommate stays outside [of the dormitory] until it is time to sleep.” (O15)

“I know other people living here [in this nhà trọ]. We try to help each other by going to the market and picking up vegetables when they do not have time to...My friends are my co-workers and neighbours. Even when I go back to Kien Giang, my friends call me on my cell phone.” (U21)

“When my neighbour lost his wallet last month, I took him to re-apply for his motorbike licence and his hồ khẩu. I also lent him 200,000 VND until he was paid from work. It was strange that he would ask me since we don’t know each other well. He is new to the area and I think he did not have anyone else to ask.” (H8)

“I don’t know my neighbours. I will lend them money if they need help but that’s all. I am too old to be involved in other people’s business.” (V22)

People will generally stay out of their neighbour’s affairs, even during emergencies. When asked about helping others in the neighbourhood, one woman (O15) described an incident that occurred a few weeks ago. A neighbour, inebriated one evening, fell from the third floor of a house. She said she heard a loud “thump” but did not pay attention until much later, when others realized that he lay injured on the ground. Even still, residents were slow to act. Most people continued on with their business: sitting, chatting, some walked by, others stood watching. It was only a long while later when a man ordered others to help did people start to mobilize, but this still took a long while to find a motorbike driver and recruit others to help carry the injured man onto the vehicle. The man suffered multiple fractures and stayed in the hospital for several days. Neighbours offered small donations as financial support, but neither his roommates nor neighbours had gone to visit him in the hospital. She told me that one week later, his family had to come from the north to take him back to their quê. The injured man had moved to the area six months ago, and although his move was short in duration, it surprised me that his two roommates did not visit them. Although I don’t believe this example can be generalized, how people respond (or don’t respond) to others’ suffering offers a glimpse into the social disconnectedness between people in this area.
5.5 Regional Differences

For administrative purposes, the government has grouped Việt Nam’s 64 provinces (tỉnh) into eight distinct geographical regions: Northwest, Northeast, Red River Delta, North Central Coast, South Central Coast, Central Highlands, Southeast, and Mekong River Delta (see Figure 5.1). In daily life, Vietnamese people generally rely on three categories to differentiate groups: Northern (Miền Bắc), Central (Miền Trung), and Southern (Miền Nam).

My conversations revealed that social divisions based on regional fragmentation within groups themselves are underway in Bình Trị Đồng. These three categories are important to individuals as a way of categorizing in-groups and out-groups, of “us” and “them” based on regional allegiances. These three categories of northern, southern, or central Vietnamese are deliberately used as an attempt to over-simplify and over-generalize; thus, those who employ this language overlook the complexities and individuality that exists among people within these categories. Regional differences greatly influence social relationships as close friendships and even daily socialization are forged along regional lines. In the wider city, regional tensions characterize relationships: urbanites skeptical of rural peoples and rural peoples skeptical of urbanites. Here, rural peoples are skeptical of other rural peoples whose native village is far away. There exists solidarity between migrants belonging to a certain region in which a collective identity is forged between these sub-groups:

“Only my close friends are mostly from the central provinces. I only keep superficial relationships with those who are not from the central provinces.” (B2)

“I am drawn to southern people but feel no discrimination against others.” (W23)

“I have little in common with them [southerners].” (O15)

A 24-year old garment worker from the southern province of Tiên Giang used the pejorative label, “lạc hậu” to describe northern migrants as “backward” and “crude”:

“I cannot marry a northerner. My parents [from the southern province in Tiền Giang] would not approve. They will think that I have become lạc hậu just like them [northerners]...My behaviour is so different. We [southerners] speak with more respect with each other.” (X24)
“Something is off, their voice, their speech, their dress, and their peculiar habits.” (Y25)

Local discrimination is also evident in daily social life and the anxieties surrounding a ‘parasitic’ spread of different migrant workers into cities. These prejudices signal strong social divisions and social exclusion that can further alienate migrants. One migrant told me that the area is being invaded by northern migrants and she prefers not to associate with many of them. From the southern province of Kiên Giang and living here for over seven years, she frequently spoke of her disgust with the rising cost of land and cost of living because the area is being overrun with northern migrants. Discussions with
migrants revealed that although they were migrants themselves, saw other migrants as “legitimate” migrant groups while others were seen as “non-legitimate” migrant groups and that these were according to one’s native quê:

“We [northerners and I] have little contact. To me, they are strange. You see, in the past, only people from close provinces lived in my neighbourhood. We could speak and help each other because we could relate to similar experiences. Speaking to them was easy. Nowadays, transportation is better and people are coming from everywhere and I find it hard to understand what they are saying. And today, everything, from the price of fruit to rental rates is so expensive!” (Z26)

“I know that others from Kiên Giang all live far from their quê. So if they need help, I will help them.” (U21)

Not only do people feel an allegiance to northerners, southerners, or central groups, but some describe their allegiance to those from a specific province and not just these three regions. For instance, a 28-year old woman from the northern province of Thanh Hóa explains:

“I feel a strong lòng hương [loyalty] to my fellow villagers [from the northern province of Thanh Hóa]. I feel myself outnumbered here. Thanh Hóa people here stick together. The Miền Nam people [southerners], mostly from Long An province and Tiền Giang province are very dominant. I cannot understand their group.” (O15)

A 24-year old single migrant told me that his sixth grade education and a job in a shoe factory would not be suitable for anyone else than a southern girl:

“My spending habits are different from those in the north. Women from the north have a higher education, and can make more money and so, spend more money. I feel that these women would not be able to fit into my lifestyle.” (A27)

When I asked a single migrant whose roommate had recently moved out what qualities she wanted in a roommate, she answered that it was important for her to live with someone “like me” (B2). She clarified that a good roommate would be from the central provinces who had similar eating habits so the smell and taste of her cooking would not bother her roommate. The ability to hide one’s accent also becomes a key form of social integration according to migrants I interviewed.

One migrant’s past experience with regional discrimination has forced her to disguise her accent as a coping mechanism:

“When I first moved here [eight years ago], people laughed at my accent. I became nervous to speak in public at first. I tried for a long time to disguise my accent but it was
not natural. Now that there are so many other migrants here from Miền Trung [the central provinces] I don’t feel so worried about my speaking.” (I9)

One 22-year old migrant said that he tried to change, but this was not so easy:

“When I’m here, I try to behave like a southerner...Through dress and speaking...But when I return to Sơn Dương [a village in northern Việt Nam] for Tết [Vietnamese New Year], I shed these behaviours and go back to my old ways...but sometimes my family will still criticize how much I have changed.” (B28)

Another woman told me that she felt no regional discrimination, but her husband does:

“My husband used to tease the northern accent. He would mock and laugh at their pronunciation. But when his sister [who also lives in Bình Trị Đông] married a northern man, he has to refrain from teasing northerners.” (K11)

A 33-year old man who operates a bánh mì (Vietnamese sandwich) stall with his wife, tells me that he avoids making friends with northerners. There is an immediate connection, he says, with customers who are from Tiền Giang province. I then asked, “how can you tell the difference between a migrant and an urbanite?” He does not hesitate in his response: their accents and their dress are automatic give-aways:

“Their accent of course! And northerners try to dress like they are not poor. Central people have an old-fashioned look about them.” (C29)

When I suggested that treating everyone equally despite their regional difference is good for his reputation by attracting more customers, he simply laughed and shrugged.

Regionalism is very dominant in this area, largely because such diverse mixtures of people have moved here from throughout the country. With them they bring their cultural and individual idiosyncrasies have been formed and entrenched in their character. Some are willing to give this up and try to integrate while others continue to hold onto their old habits. Both stated and unstated social norms exist and are perpetuated by certain regional groups, especially noticeable among southerners who are greater in number and thus, form a majority “in-group” to a minority “out-group.” People are always trying to understand how they fit in with others and with their surroundings, adopting strategies of integration or resistance to change. As such, strategies of integration are used to disguise their differences. Internalizing social and cultural norms of the dominant group is a strategy of psychologically adapting to urban life. The over-
emphasis and over-reliance of these differences keep people further apart and prevent social cohesion from forming thus bringing the issue of place and belonging into question.

5.6 Place and Belonging

How is one’s spatial environment understood? For instance, how do people feel about their surroundings? How does living on the outskirts of the city affect people’s social behaviours? Does the question of place—or conversely, displacement—even matter? Certainly. Location is important in how people view social-spatial integration within and into cities. Living in one area within the city or on the periphery may lead to perceptions of whether residents “fit in” or “belong.” When we speak about the life trajectory of migrants who are dislocated from their native “location” (or their quê), the question of fitting in, not fitting in, belonging, or not belonging, is especially salient.

More and more, many escape their villages as an expression of desire for a more modern and cosmopolitan urban culture. Yet interestingly, people move here to become “urban” but stay confined to the edge of the city. Many may not leave the area for days or weeks on end. Their home and workplace are located close together and at night they are able to retire into their homes or spend time outside. Although it is easily accessible to get in and out of the area, many do not venture outside of Bình Trị Đông, let alone outside of Bình Tân district. Migrants state that common activities include driving their motorbikes in and out of the downtown core, going to Đ bpm Sen amusement park, but they rarely travel into the city simply for consumption of goods because it is more expensive. As such, their visits are typically infrequent and short in duration. Very few had forged friendships with local “Saigoners”19 and those who did had infrequently made visits to see them. A study by Tran (2004a) found that 50% of migrants they do not have friends in the city. Aside from landlords of the nhà trọ, my research revealed a similar lack of social interaction with Saigoners:

“There is no reason for me to go into the city. What is the purpose? I would not have anyone to see.” (P16)

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19 After the Viêt Nam War in 1975, the city of Sài Gòn merged with its surrounding province of Gia Định and renamed Hồ Chí Minh City. Many locals still use the old name, Sài Gòn, which now refers mainly to the downtown core. Today, the term “Saigon” usually refers to someone who is from the city center (thus, not a rural migrant).
“Saigoners and I don’t share the same interests. Rural people’s purpose is to work and earn money. Saigoners work and have a home here and so are more comfortable. We have different lifestyles.” (M13)

“I work in a small clothing factory with other migrants. Few Saigoners work here. I think most of them do not accept the lower wages here so they will find jobs closer to the city for a higher pay. So, I don’t know many native city people.” (B2)

Feelings of local alienation exist:

“I want to return to my hometown as soon as I can. It’s sad here. I still feel lonely. My conditions at work are bad. I have no background, no roots, no relatives. Life is unpredictable here. I don’t feel that I belong to this place. I am not excited about this area.” (T20)

Expectations of city-life are different from reality and the importance of retaining perspective is important:

“Before people move here, they don’t know what it’s like to live in the city. Their expectations are too high. When you arrive here, you feel that this place will never change how you feel inside about your family and about your quê. Even today, I have changed so little.” (A1)

A 37-year old seamstress who migrated here at the age of 15 from the southern province of Trà Vinh feels separated from other urbanites and the city:

“Through my work, I have met diverse groups of people. Most of them are customers who come from all over the country and inside the city. But even though I know a lot of urban people, I never consider myself an urban person; my native character is a rural person.” (D30)

From a rural commune outside of the city to its elite membership of an “inner” district, Bình Tân’s new status as a quận has done little to change how people imagine their role in this space. This area may have been re-categorized as a quận and no longer a huyện, but this has not changed the psychological understanding of people here who still see themselves as living on the periphery. Several migrants told me, “No, I don’t think Bình Trị Đông is really part of the ‘city.’” Ambivalent about their social and spatial belongingness in the city, a sense of being in-between: living, yet not really belonging to their physical or social environment, despite the number of hours they spend with others and in such close proximity.
5.7 Migrant Identity

How people relate to each other has a lot to do with how they understand themselves and thus migrant identity is also a key component of this story. Some embrace the urban lifestyle, others are resistant to it, and others simply do not know how they feel. Many longed for an urban lifestyle before their move yet even the years following their move, saw this urban lifestyle as a threat to their rural identity that has been so firmly embedded in their character. In this diverse space of rural-urban mixture, rural identity of migrants, I argue, remains strong even after years of being in the city. This rural character, in large part, contributes to the social disconnectedness of being surrounded by “others” who come from different provinces, different cities far away.

Some see themselves as permanently relegated to an “underclass” and thus never fully assimilated. One 31-year old informant who has been living here for seven years says:

“How can I change myself so quickly?! Since I’m originally a rural person, I still keep this mentality. I don’t want to change my habits. I am not afraid of what others think.” (Z26)

Another 29-year old man told me:

“Newcomers have to be careful not to lose their bonds to their quê.” (V22)

One migrant I spoke to is a particularly revealing example of how a strong rural identity continues to persist despite the significant changes towards an “urban” life. As a teenager, she described herself as unattractive because she was “tall, skinny, and dark” (E31). From watching television and contact with neighbors who visited the countryside after living in the city, she was attracted to how refined, beautiful, and proper others seemed. Urban life, she explained, seemed much more sophisticated. She was determined to leave her family’s farm and seek a new “urban” life. Against her parents’ wishes, she left the southern province of Tiền Giang and settled in Bình Trị Đông sixteen years ago at the age of 15. Since being here, she has settled in two different nhà trọ. At first, she used her older sister’s hổ khẩu to convince employers that she was 19 years old and found work in the informal sector as a sinh tộ (fruit drink blend) vendor and

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20 This informant’s parents vehemently disapproved and her father drove his motorbike into the city and physically took her back to Tiền Giang twice. The third time she fled, her father gave up.
seamstress in a factory, and she currently sews hats for a small business. After she married five years ago, she and her husband saved $4,000 USD and built a five-bedroom nhà trọ next to her home where she lives with her husband’s family. When I asked her about her identity, she does not hesitate:

“I am a rural person. Look at the way I dress, the way I wash my clothes. I live in this city but my husband and I don’t plan to live here long. When my son [age 2] is finished high school, we will retire to the countryside. My parents will build us a house on our land. We don’t want to stay here.” (E31)

After living in the city for almost two decades, she has experienced many personal changes. Still, her economic mobility and her landownership are not enough to keep her here in the long-term. She repeats over and over again that social connections are xa lạ (increasingly distant) and relationships in the city are transitory and impersonal. This feeling of urban isolation is not a new concept. Several writers have long been critical of the urban metropolis as a site for social alienation (this will be discussed in further detail in chapter 6).

Her story is a fitting illustration of how rural mentality remains strong and that economic success cannot compensate for a desire to return to one’s quê. This dominant rural identity has not been eroded, despite a drastic change in one’s environment, and may weaken the effort to establish social bonds with those in their immediate surroundings.

5.8 Local “Community”

What is the meaning of “community” in Bình Trị Đồng and how do various actors conceive of themselves within a wider social context? The general attitude of migrants towards community seemed to be one of uninvolvement, and a large majority of migrants are completely unaffected by public participation. Most informants explain that private demands constrain public involvement and more specifically, time constraints effectively keep people out of public life. For instance, responses such as, “I work all day and don’t

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21 The informant’s family sold a section of their agricultural land in Đồng Tháp province in order to purchase her gold jewelry as a wedding present. After her marriage, she sold her jewelry and used that money to invest in a nhà trọ. Her story of land ownership is not typical. The purpose of including her story is to highlight the question of social identity and not as a typical example of the migrant experience. The value of land has soared in southern Việt Nam so significantly that many people will never experience land ownership.
Having time” or “My family obligations come first” were common throughout my discussions.

Nurturing relationships with neighbours is not important and community associations are rare and so, many are self-reliant. From interviews, many residents are indifferent to forming any sort of social solidarity. Several residents mentioned that involvement with others, whether through formal structures of community events or informal socializing, was not of great concern to them:

“Community life is better in Quy Nhơn. Here, you just work and make money.” (L12)

“Public activities? No! I don’t do any of that.” (N14)

“No one asks me to join in local activities. If I have any problems I just tell my landlord or keep them to myself. It will not make a difference.” (A27)

“I don’t feel integrated into the lifestyle here...The officials do not invite me to public events. But I don’t care.” (H8)

“I don’t make an effort to join with others. I hardly ever do any leisure activities. In my opinion, we all want different things for ourselves and don’t care about others. I feel a risk about being with others.” (B2)

“I’ve never had any complaints. But if I did, I wouldn’t know who to go to. The people I know are ordinary people, just like me. I don’t know anyone who has that much power. It doesn’t matter; my complaints would not make a difference anyways.” (I9)

What do people mean when asked about “community”? Interestingly, one woman considered renewing her household registration papers as a form of community involvement:

“The only community activity I am involved in is renewing my hộ khầu. Or if the government requests, I contribute money to local charities. But I don’t have time to do anything more.” (R18)

From my research, there tends is a general lack of community-mindedness and excluding official public involvement (such as state elections), people strike me as indifferent spectators. Without solidarity, this sense of individualism is partly

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22 Before the new Residency Law was enacted on 1 July 2007, short-term migrants had to renew their hộ khầu in order to stay in the city legally. In my discussions, many migrants however, do not bother for several reasons, including their plans to return to the city after a few months, the lack of time, the lack of importance, or that they had no intention of owning property in the city (which requires proper hộ khầu). Today, negotiations and informal practices mean that one’s hộ khầu is no longer an accurate indication of actual lived experiences.
responsible for the lack of connectivity and helpfulness among neighbours and the
general lack of social consciousness in the area.
Chapter 6: The Role of Local Government

In the previous section, my focus was on social interactions between people. In this section, I take a more meso level approach to discuss how people interact with institutions such as the state and local government. Moreover, the government has a political role, and the extent to which this influences everyday life is intrinsic to a migrant’s experience. As such, this chapter moves away from finer social interactions among people to link these people’s experiences to a broader institutional framework. Official government documents and maps and conversations with local level and district level officials are given here.

6.1 Government Perception of Migrants

A large proportion of the literature on migration generally refers to the negative impacts of migration such as the social prejudices and tensions between local urbanites and migrants and the more formal practices, such as exclusion of migrants from social services (see for example, Deshingkar 2006). Today, local officials in Bình Trị Đồ ng do not prevent nor discourage migration; rather, systems are put in place to accommodate the transition as smoothly as possible. This is an important shift: the perception of migrants in this area is rather positive, contrary to much of the discussion that points to migrants as the cause of many social problems. How to accommodate rather discourage migration is now becoming a central issue for government who now recognize that migrants are a strong resource and an essential economic component to the area’s development. The local government understands the commercial value of land but is now becoming more concerned with the daily human challenges faced by many migrants. When I spoke to Vice Chairman of Bình Trị Đồ ng, Mr. Kien, about his perception towards migrants, his responses were very positive. Mr. Kien tells me that he treats all inhabitants in Bình Trị Đồ ng as equal, irrelevant of họ khẩu where migrants are seen as “người địa phương” (similar to local people)—a term that did not exist a few years ago—and “đất lành chim đậu” which means that fertile land (đất lành) is a resting place for birds (chim đậu). This analogy, a Vietnamese researcher later explained, refers to migrants (as “birds”) who are flocking towards “fertile land” (of Bình Trị Đồ ng). From this standpoint, migrants are increasingly viewed as a resource and not a burden. This is
not surprising given the significant economic activity in recent years. Mr. Kien tells me that in the past, Bình Trị Đông made $3 billion VND per year, but today, Bình Trị Đông “A” alone makes roughly $15 billion VND per year, more than 40 times than in previous years. Given these statistics, it comes as no surprise that the government looks so favourably upon migrants in this area.

6.2 Expanding Community Participation in Bình Trị Đông?

The issues surrounding movement of people under situations of tremendous change are not only deeply human but very political. Migrants in Bình Trị Đông need to be understood as part of the policies, organizations, and relations that shape their experience in this neighborhood. As such, this section discusses planning policies both from official documents and from discussion with local officials. It is designed to understand where migrants fit into the state’s vision of the future. So far, we have analyzed how migrants conceive of “community” and their social relationships and now, the task is to shift our focus to understanding “community” from a different perspective. The role of government in shaping the area is important to a migrant’s daily experiences and how migrants experience and understand local community informs their everyday life. We know the area has long-term plans for development, but how do these processes of political involvement and political change effect the population of migrants? What is the role of the government in managing migrants in this space? Can governments promote social cohesion through public participation? Thus the task for governments is to devise strategies for migrants to not only use this space to satisfy economic goals but to actual build solidarity and social interaction to create a more harmonious social environment.

Local administration in Việt Nam is structured in three tiers below the central government in Hà Nội. At each of these administrative levels, the People’s Committees represent the executive branches of government which are mirrored and generally controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party structures (Mattner 2004: 122). The local and city government have long been under pressure to adopt a more equitable approach to planning. In previous years, the state tends to sacrifice their citizens’ needs for economic growth. Change through local empowerment, according to Mr. Kien is part
of new inclusive planning policies of the district. Yet when we speak of change, we need to understand change from what to what? We know that previous city plans were a product of either *ad hoc* development or grand visions of elite groups, whether they be French colonizers or the Vietnamese Communist Party. What is less clear is what the new future of the city means.

New policies offer a glimpse into the direction of change. Although not without imperfections and challenges in actual implementation, state structure is undergoing a significant departure from traditionally top-down approach to decision-making. In 1998, for instance, Decree 29 introduced four categories of direct popular participation in decision-making processes at the ward and commune level through *information, consultation, approval, and supervision* (Mattner 2004: 121):

**Information:** Local officials must provide detailed information about a broad range of issues, from national laws to local projects. This includes local budgets, land use plans, and the enforcement of law and order. Information is to be disseminated in public meetings, or through written documents, public postings or public address systems.

**Consultation:** Most local government initiatives require public discussion prior to being decided by people’s councils and committees on the ward or commune level. This includes long-term socioeconomic planning and land use plans. Feedback from local residents is gathered through questionnaires, feedback boxes or public meetings.

**Approval:** Local officials must seek majority popular approval for a number of activities, including public works that require contributions from residents. In addition, approval must be obtained for fund-raising plans or for setting up boards to supervise construction projects. Implementation must take place through public meetings or referendums. If the local people’s committee deems decisions to be inconsistent with relevant laws, it can refer them to the district people’s committee for review.

**Supervision:** There are a number of local issues which are “to be supervised and inspected by the people,” including the ward or commune’s budget, land management, results of investigations against corrupt officials and social services. This also applies to the general activities of the people’s committee and the implementation of its decisions. Implementation is envisaged through the establishment of people’s inspection boards or through mass organizations. In addition, residents can make proposals and complaints, as well as request information from local officials about issues of concern to them.

This policy is an important step because of its detailed outline towards devolving state powers to a local level as well as its overall political significance of this process. Other scholars are also optimistic. According to Carpenter et al. (2004: 536), there is a positive direction in Việt Nam towards local empowerment to produce institutional change, such as small voluntary associations within the last 15 years. While none of these associations are political, networks created have been mobilized for collective action and towards a
concerned voice for better local governance. As such, community groups and ward-level People’s Committees are beginning to have a say in local matters. Hence, social capital and the ability to organize and work together to initiate local change is very much part of the new urban governance strategy. It is important to keep in mind, however, that seemingly progressive Master Plans in Việt Nam are usually idealized top-down versions of an elite group of planning experts in which opinions of ordinary residents are rarely sought (Coulthart et al. 2006: 31). Therefore, their implementation must be critically evaluated.

Bình Trị Đồng may operate as a transitional space but authorities still have long-term planning goals which involve public participation. In addressing the question of change, the new local mandate is to pursue the best interests of the community. My discussions with Mr. Kien shed considerable insight into the planning policies of this particular area. He was extremely knowledgeable about the development of this ward, and helpful in providing us with official documents and official maps of Bình Trị Đồng. Always well-prepared for questions, and with an excellent memory for statistics and policies, our interactions were pleasant and informative. He was always cheerful and willing to provide official documents, allowing us to photocopy as we wish. Although sometimes unreliable with maintaining appointments, his rigorous schedule meant we would often be waiting hours to see him, not to mention the many times we had to re-schedule upon arrival or be frequently interrupted by staff members who would walk in and out of the office with paperwork to sign. After three meetings and almost two hours of conversation, the underlying message is related to increase in participatory planning.

Mr. Kien informed me that local policies are now guided by a movement to construct neighbourhoods with good cultural quarters (khu phố văn hoá23). Although officials recognize the value of land for industrial development, preserving livelihoods, promoting liveable areas, as well as environmental protection for residents are top priorities. He spoke of a shift in decision-making power from local authorities to the citizens, speaking of a new planning approach which avoids disrupting people’s daily

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23 A cultural quarter (khu phố văn hoá) is the official recognition of a neighbourhood that is granted by the government once certain criteria in that area have been met. Among these are neighbourhoods that take an active role in eradicating poverty by building houses for the poor, supporting education for poor students, mobilizing people in helping the poor, and promoting solidarity among people.
lives as much as possible, which is in line with official policies such as Decree 29 outlined above. In the past, people have been forcibly moved out of the area to make way for enterprises to build factories on this land. Currently there exist detailed resettlement plans that include financial reimbursement, temporary housing solutions, and job training for displaced people. When asked about the state’s involvement in public life, he speaks about the new approaches to public space in his ward. The new local objective is to save unused land for constructing communal spaces (e.g., schools and parks) rather than reserving land strictly for industrial development. It seems the district is moving towards providing institutional support for citizens to pursue political, cultural, and leisure activities (Wollmann 2006: 1429).

Vacant land, according to Mr. Kien, is valuable and must be preserved for public use, for the best interest of the citizens, and not for permitting just any industries and factories to set up businesses. Officials are keenly aware of the environmental problems created by factories and are trying to be careful about selecting certain factories from entering. But his local-level vision conflicts with city-level priorities. For instance, the National Assembly of Việt Nam is publicly calling for foreign investment in new urban areas, which means plans to relocate and keep factories on the outskirts of the city to alleviate pressures off the city center (Quang & Kammeier 2002: 381)—which includes Bình Tân ward—a potential site of conflict for district-level officials. When industries relocate to the edge of the city, Mr. Kien says there is collaboration between district and city-level officials on this issue of relocation and negotiation.

6.3 Do Policies Lead to Action?

In the previous section, district officials expressed their optimism about the new direction of inclusive planning by widening the space of political involvement for residents. Their concept of community is framed in political terms, envisioning community as a place of greater public inclusion and efforts to engage the public in political life. This sentiment is not surprising given his high-standing political position that may influence how he answers his questions. But is this really happening? This ideal policy of devolving powers to the local people by giving them a voice to move from disempowerment to empowerment has not been fully realized because of implementation
problems. It is imperative now to look at implementation, or how theory moves into practice. Are these co-ordinated efforts to socially and politically include the influx of migrants just a façade for officials to safeguard their own interests? How are these official policies being realized for migrants? How exactly does the ward initiate greater inclusive planning and how are people given greater decision-making power?

According to Mr. Kien, state goals and local goals are slowly converging, and thus setting the stage for a balance reflected in local governments committed to local development that prioritizes the citizens’ interests. He cites a bottom-up approach to planning, but recognizes that this is a difficult process. For instance, Mr. Kien explains that locals and migrants can voice their grievances via locally-organized public meetings which establish a dialogue between officials and residents. The officials will then bring the issues raised at these meetings to the city-level People’s Council. At the People’s Council, each grievance is recorded and the legitimacy of each complaint is evaluated. He admits that when proposals are made, the government’s response is rather slow as a result of a lack of funding. He is eager, however, to continually remind us that concerning land use, there is a new approach in which decision-making is now shifting to the people.

One example is the policies to handle displaced groups. Although displaced families are offered financial compensation and job training, local objections are, on the whole, largely irrelevant. For instance, when I asked about local objections to projects, Mr. Kien could only recall one complaint during his entire four years as Vice Chairman. When I asked how complaints are resolved, Mr. Kien was simple and blunt in his response: If people do not comply, they are pressured to do so by powerful authorities and coerced by government. Local grievances or objections to a plan can thus only be made after the real decision-making has been determined, and then, their objections must be evaluated at many bureaucratic levels, and in the end, are largely irrelevant as they will be pressured by governments to accept the new relocation terms. Public participation is not simply a matter of giving a voice to a greater number of people but as illustrated here, is much more complicated. Although there is a local-level vision, Mr. Kien could not offer one official document about this new public participation in planning, leading me to question its formal recognition among official circles, or whether
he was trying to uphold his public image by offering an optimistic vision. Thus, it is important to be cautious in believability.

When I asked the interviewees about their views on local community participation, most did not share Mr. Kien and Mrs. Yen’s enthusiasm and optimism. Communication of policies is rather poor in the area. Most people are unaware of the governments’ plans. Most felt marginalized and excluded from public participation. In fact, not one expressed any positive sentiment towards having an active role within their local community. An overwhelming number of registered and unregistered migrants I spoke to generally felt disconnected from their social community as a whole, disconnected from decision-making, lacked a clear common identity and thus, had no clear sense of a “common good.” Each individual is striving to achieve his or her own individual goals and view Bình Trị Động as a temporary living space, and does not place a great deal of importance on fostering social relationships, which contributes to fragmented and disjointed groups.

The timing of public involvement is an important factor which can influence the political agenda. Early public involvement is likely to foster change and thus, is considered more “dangerous” to the status quo than late public involvement (Sharp & Connelly 2002: 49). As mentioned previously, Decree 29 calls for communication at the early consultation via public discussions before official decisions are made. Yet in reality, residents tell me that there is little, if any, consultation but rather, the timing of public involvement in Bình Trị Động occurs at the later stages. For instance, resettlement plans for displaced persons are managed by a Reimbursement Committee which consists of a group of professionals who are part of that specific project which means their own corporate interests take priority. The majority of documents provided by Mr. Kien concerned reimbursement for displaced people for road development and socioeconomic development reports for Bình Trị Động. One glaring problem is that these documents on reimbursement are retroactive and not preventative. A reimbursement committee, which consists of project members, handles reimbursement to residents but only after decision-making by powerful stakeholders has already been approved.
The district of Bình Tân’s official website\textsuperscript{24} is the main source of disseminating information to the public about political, economic, and social changes on a local level. Relying on the internet for information is riddled with problems of exclusion. For instance, although internet prices have been reduced by more than half since 1997 at 150 VND per minute, accessing the internet is an unattainable luxury for poor people who comprise of 28.9\% of the population in 2002. According to Surborg’s (2006) calculation, the GDP per capita in 2002 was 6.7 million VND per year, just slightly more than double the cost of accessing the internet for an hour a day (71). More accessible means of communicating the ward’s policies must be considered if there is any hope of engaging a wider public.

At present though, policies to create favourable condition for migrants’ integration by city government are still limited. Social integration and communication are still seen as largely self-initiated private affair and therefore government sees it as intrusive to monitor social relations. The government stays away from community involvement and migrants have to usually manage themselves within their urban environment. To be fair, it may be too early to assess whether these district-level policies of widened public participation have been experienced by locals. Implementing a new approach to urban planning requires changes on many levels which is never easy. Suggestions made for strengthening the community will take time. Attempts need to be made to develop an understanding among community members. Disseminating information, encouraging public participation, offering non-discriminatory avenues for public dissent, and establishing a trusting environment must be initiated by government. But community-building projects also require informed citizens who know their rights and are not afraid to exercise them. A strong form of local government will be able to identify the needs and problems of the locals—not an easy task given the high turnover of residents who carry with them their own self-serving goals.

\textsuperscript{24} The official website of \textit{quận} Bình Tân is http://www.binhtan.hochiminhcit.gov.vn/web/tintuc.
Chapter 7: Analysis and Interpretation of Research

7.1 Social Relationships and Community

In this paper, I have been careful in using the term “community.” But what exactly does “community” or “local community” mean and do migrants in Bình Trị Đồng have a sense of “local community”? There are competing definitions of community and different areas develop according to these concepts. Morgan (1942) observed that throughout history, people lived in communal dwellings in which mutual help, respect, and working together towards similar goals bred mutual affection, and nurtured customs and traditions. Early writings from Toennies (1957) linked traditional notions of community to two social forms: the kin-group and small villages or neighbourhoods. Others, however, have defined community as a structured entity based on a specific population, place, or location. (c.f. Macionis 1978: 131-132). These traditional notions of kinship and neighbourhoods based on mutual aid and common goals very rarely resonate with a large urban population today.

Anthropologists and sociologists have argued that these place-based communities have all changed in the last 150 years in which present modern societies are based on greater individual freedoms has meant a decline in human connectedness, community spirit, and neighborliness (McLaughlin & Davidson 1986). Louis Wirth (1938) was one of the first scholars to identify urban anomie, advancing the notion that urban spaces breed anonymity, transitory, and impersonal relationships (75). In his sociological framework, Toennies (1957) popularized two German terms to convey that community is undergoing a shift from the personal and local (gemeinschaft) to the modern, industrial, and urban society that is much more impersonal (gesellschaft). More recent works, particularly Ash Amin’s (2006) *The Good City*, criticizes the city as a site of impersonal relations which are chaotic and intrusive on individual privacy. He writes, “Sociologically, contemporary cities do not spring to mind the sites of community, happiness, and well-being, except perhaps for those in the fast lane…and those excited by the buzz of frenetic urban life. For the vast majority, cities are polluted, unhealthy, tiring, overwhelming, confusing, alienating” (2006: 1011).

“Community” today is no longer only rooted in a neighbourhood or within geographical boundaries. Research into social networks shows that individuals feel
connected to others based on primary friendship networks through feelings of affectivity. Sociologist Ken Wilkinson (1991) defined communities from an interactional perspective in which local communities of people live together in the same space. Similarly, John Macionis (1978) advances the notion of a “search for community” which states that the modern individual is devoid of physically-bounded community but instead, is on a search for roots, identity and certainty (131). He advances that by “community,” people are referring to friendship is a primary network that has replaced traditional notions of community as geographically bound to one’s physical location (131). Moving toward a larger, national scale, Benedict Anderson (1991) proposes an anthropological definition of the nation as an “imagined political community” (6) in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*. The nation, argues Anderson, is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6; emphasis in original). Furthermore, the nation is imagined to be sovereign—that is, free to govern itself—and limited, in terms of membership and territory. Indeed, as Anderson observes, “No nation imagines itself to be coterminous with mankind” (7).

More modern views of community have been set forth by David Connell (2002) who emphasized the role of technology in connecting people. In the last century community has been found, lost, and saved: “found” in concepts of social capital, civil society, and community capacity building; “lost” in the pursuit of globalization; and “saved” in the virtual world of the internet and other forms of media (2002: 1). Recall the example used at the beginning of this paper in which I drew on the semi-final match between Việt Nam and Iraq. Việt Nam’s advancement in the soccer tournaments was one of the main topics of conversation among people for several weeks. Whether in homes, at overcrowded cafés or bars, or on the streets of downtown Hồ Chí Minh City where thousands of residents huddled around an oversized television to watch the tournament, communities were “saved” by technology that drew an entire country together. Communities were forged around this rare sports event in which technology facilitated the transcendence of local and regional boundaries. In essence, although these definitions have changed over time, what has not changed is that people are always searching for
something called “community” which is really, just a place of belonging with others in the world.

7.2 Community in Bình Trị Đông

In modern urban society, many scholars have blamed the rise of industrialization and urban life as signalling the “loss of community” (Wirth 1938; Amin 2006; Stewart and Stoker 1995). Others tell us that (poorer) families simply do not have the surplus time to engage in political or social life (Friedmann 1998: 24). Contributions by Hellmut Wollmann (2006) have added to this discourse about constraints on active community life. Citizens, he posits, are preoccupied with personal achievements thereby eroding social cohesion towards a unified goal:

Under their single-purpose orientation, the many actors are motivated, compelled and fixed, each and every one striving for the achievement of their individual and particular goals—maximizing gains and minimising losses and externalising costs, while ignoring or counteracting the goals and interests of other actors. Thus, among the multitude and network of actors, an all but structural blindness for the ‘common good,’ for the ‘best interest of the community’ prevails as all are disposed to give priority to their own single-purpose and self-centered interests over the common good and ‘public-regarding concerns’ (Wollmann 2006: 1434).

Here, Wollmann discusses the fragmentation borne from individualism, and “structural blindness for the common good” that is evident in the social dynamics between migrants in Bình Trị Đông. As became clear in my discussions with migrants, individual goals are far superior to social cohesion. This is important: if we do not have common bonds that we cannot agree on a “common good.”

A sense of community and what community means in Bình Trị Đông is very transitional. The “loss of community perspective” implies that to lose a community, there is a community to be lost, which in turn means that there needs to be social solidarity. In Bình Trị Đông, there does not seem to be. Community must come from the people but this is so difficult due to the temporary nature of this space. Due to a high turnover of renters, social relationships are rarely sustained after migrants move out of dormitories into different areas. Similarly, because of the frequent changing of new faces, local togetherness is difficult to develop, let alone maintain. I therefore suggest that because of such a high turnover, migrants and urbanites alike have a psychological tendency to remain detached from others as well as their immediate physical space because many
perceive this area as *transitional* and their migrant experience as *temporary*; thus this place is an economic means to an end, thereby reducing interpersonal connectedness and on a larger scale, reducing community bonds. As my research has shown, this was true for migrants who had been here for five, ten, and even over fifteen years.

Moreover, the notion of “community” to migrants in Bình Trị Đồng does not mean a territorial entity that is geographically bound to a location. Migrants in Bình Trị Đồng may inhabit a common territory but this does not mean that friendships are forged around shared migrant experiences. Rather, migrants construct the meaning of community not as physically inhabiting a particular area but rather, what community means to an individual is defined primarily by their *emotional attachment* to their family and friends in their *quê*. Although they may inhabit this space, their longing for their *quê* as an unconditional site of social and emotional support, security, and belonging is so deeply entrenched. Their experience in the city, by contrast, is largely devoid of these unconditional bonds. If they do exist, they are fleeting and not as strong as their attachment to their native village. “Community” for residents in Bình Trị Đồng is based on common connectedness or sharing a common bond to their family members, not social or physical propinquity. Here, emotional bonds of attachment trump geographic space and communities are experienced over vast stretches of time and across borders. Could their common bond be that they are all just temporary sojourners, not just physically, but psychologically and emotionally as well? If it is, then this physical closeness and lack of emotional closeness is not enough for social organization or community-building. Uniting around their long-term goals of one day, being separated and leaving this place means people do not want to invest their time or emotional energy. Migrants are hesitant to reach out to others on an interpersonal level or to their wider community. Thus, social fragmentation and disconnectedness continue to exist between people regardless of age, gender, or length of stay.

Feelings of disconnectedness to those around them are exacerbated by strong regional tensions among different ethnic groups with different individual identities. It seems the major commonality lies in their long-term goals of making money and returning to their native *quê*. Since their identity is largely based on their rural connections, efforts towards community-building in Bình Trị Đồng fall low on the
priority list. It is not that Bình Trị Đồng is without a sense of community, but rather, community by migrants in this area are defined according to emotional rather than physical criteria. Community is born out of common connectedness through bonds formed at earlier stages of one’s life in their quê, not sharing physical space or common migrant experiences. As such, how people conceive of community has direct implications for how people manage their daily social relationships.

7.2.1 Public Space in Bình Trị Đồng

My conversations revealed that the social cohesion of the community is not well developed because people who live close together do not know each other well. Social propinquity does not breed social connectedness. How people use public space is of consideration here especially given the crowded housing conditions. Both housing density of individual dorms and the buildings are crowded. A typical 3 meter x 3 meter room can house as many as four adults. Recent bodies of work have emerged that link public space with citizenship rights and collective identity. For instance, Drummond (2000: 2378) argues that the distinction between public and private space in Việt Nam’s cities are blurred from the “inside out” in which families and individuals make use of so-called public space for private activities. That being said, having sufficient, unmonitored and unregulated use of public space is vital socially, psychologically, and economically for citizens in large cities. Streets are lined with independent vendors offering goods and services throughout the day. Lack of private space in the home means that most people spend their time outside of their dormitories, such as in communal courtyards, coffee shops, or socializing on the streets, thus reinforcing that public facilities such as sidewalks, alleyways, and parks in large cities act as a social escape for people from their highly dense households. Some scholars have even argued that to deny public space is to deny the right to life to carry out activities all humans must go through. This includes the government’s movement to ban sleeping in parks and begging on streets, which are not just issues of “public inappropriateness” but linked to livelihoods and therefore violates the fundamental right to exist (c.f. Mitchell 2003 in Pham 2005: 13).

Shared public space can be used to bring people together from different backgrounds to work together in projects of common interest. In Amin and Thrift’s
In their 2002 work, *The Democratic City*, they use the term "socialibility" to describe sites that offer baseline activities that can be shared by all citizens (e.g., public libraries and community centers). Amin (2006) later adds to this discourse by calling for public spaces to function as a non-discriminatory place for mixed public use, without excessive surveillance, gating, privatization or humiliation (1017). One example is public culture based on shared space through experimenting with mixed sports teams and communal gardens where neighbors work alongside each other. His argument is that public space encourages greater contact with others around shared goals, and with increased contact comes increased tolerance. This would mean that public places serve to facilitate contact and perhaps offer a space where social relationships can be fostered and nourished. From my research, the use of public space to promote increased contact among people is not necessarily relevant to community in Bình Trị Đông. It was perhaps Louis Wirth’s (1938) discourse on urban space almost seven decades ago that best articulates feelings of disconnectedness in an urban setting: “Our physical contacts are close but our social contacts are distant” (75). Although I observed frequent use of communal public areas, this did not seem to make others feel a greater closeness to one another. Shared space such as walkways, parks, and courtyards can increase intermingling for a short duration, encourage light-hearted discussions, promote friendliness, but real solidarity has yet to truly flourish; people still tend to restrain themselves from allowing deeper relationships from forming. As my first-hand accounts with migrants revealed, time and time again, few spoke of having strong ties or connectedness to others in the neighbourhood.

### 7.3 Migrant’s Rural Linkages

Another interesting theme that emerged was the strong desire by individual migrants to leave their countryside yet felt disconnected to others long after their arrival. Many migrants whom I spoke to explained that their migration into the city was based on an attraction to cosmopolitanism. This observation is quite different from previous literature that cites migration as a poverty-reduction family strategy (Anh et al. 2003; Anh 2005). More appropriately, in Jonathan Rigg’s (2006: 181) analysis of the rural south, he rightly acknowledges that the shift to cosmopolitanism is largely responsible for driving migrants out of the country and into the city. His research points to a profound
transition from rural livelihoods to non-farming activities and moreover, that many people have no interest or commitment in farming whatsoever. Livelihoods are becoming increasingly divorced from farming: an agricultural way of life is no longer desired and parents no longer want a farming life for their children. One’s particular destination of settlement is important; here, the location of Bình Trị Đông has enormous value for migrants because location is important to how people view their social-spatial integration within cities. Bình Trị Đông is seen as a base of transition towards a more “urban” or “cosmopolitan” metropolitan lifestyle and it is possible for migrants to envision economic success and social mobility otherwise they would not migrate.

Many migrants I encountered echoed Rigg’s theory of why people leave the countryside. This is particularly salient among migrants in their early to mid-20’s who left for the city as an independent decision and sometimes with strong disapproval from their parents. Those who tell me that their decision to migrate was primarily their own, I got the sense that transitioning from “rural” to “urban” lifestyle has not been easy. They cite that a desire for a new, modern lifestyle was a key factor—yet their actual experiences of social marginalization and their sense of dislocation further divorce them from achieving this cosmopolitan lifestyle. Not only do people feel weak interpersonal connections from their neighbours, but they also do not feel at all part of the city. Their location, and how they think about their location, contributes to these feelings of spatial marginality or spatial disconnectedness.

7.4 Migrant Identity and Regionalism

Migrant identity is important to thinking about one’s belonging in the world. How one thinks of themself is a starting point for understanding the wider social dynamics unfolding in Bình Trị Đông and sometimes dichotomies of urban and rural self-perception are inaccurate because many carry both. As Jonathan Rigg (1998) observed, “home” and “place” are ambiguous and shifting notions in which multiple identities—both rural and urban—can be simultaneously embodied (501). Sometimes, one identity presides over the other. As I observed throughout my research, one’s “community” is one’s “home” or “place”; or more specifically, community is about where people feel they belong which in my research, often points to their quê. Place identity, that is,
defining oneself based on the place they occupy, is not yet strong among migrants. Interwoven into the theme of identity is a discourse surrounding traditional Vietnamese values. Self-identification based on one’s native village is not entirely surprising given the strong Confucian values of filial piety in Vietnamese culture. Filial piety is based on a child’s obligation, love, and respect towards their parents. These values must be upheld rigorously as they form the cornerstone of traditional Vietnamese families. Tight kinship ties continue to be strong long after one has moved and these strong rural identities cannot be overcome and thus become a barrier towards social connectedness with others.

Migrants who move from one area to another are often characterized as a single group but if we look closely, the existence of a fractured group identity exists within these groups. Thus, it is also important to examine the process of regionalism because it fosters certain ways of thinking about the world and of conceptualising one’s relationship with others that may be antithetical to the practices of community-building. Robert Rotenberg (2002) argued that tensions exist between the metropolis and people from other regions and posed the question of whether it is more meaningful for a person to favor “provincialism” as ties to local people or “cosmopolitanism” by developing ties with strangers. Furthermore, such expressions of provincialism reinforce traditional power configurations that privilege some groups over others and buttress unequal power relationships. It is difficult to bridge this regional gap and to unite people from different backgrounds in Bình Trị Đông. Here, the distinction of “others” based on geography—which implies social and cultural differences—is a technique employed by some migrants to distinguish civilized from less civilized, “us” from “them” and creating distant interpersonal relationships. And despite the purported emergence of the “global village” and the rise of a “global culture”, provincialism does not appear to be dying out in this neighbourhood. Kelly’s (1998) research uncovered that residents born in one area felt slight resentment towards the new groups moving in. The tightly woven social fabric that existed between native groups are unraveling due to newcomers, creating “tensions”, “anomie” and “suspicions” of new groups (42). From my conversations, the discourse of provincialism and notions of regional distinctions remain firmly entrenched within the consciousness of migrants in Bình Trị Đông. The continual distinctions between “us” and “them” through language and social behaviour have not disappeared. Perhaps
negative perceptions of migrants from different regions persist because of the role of a strong rural migrant identity and as such, many migrants define themselves according to their native quê, feelings that strengthen in-groups ties and weaken out-group ties. This migrant identity perpetuates a sense of togetherness that is bounded by a superiority of their “in-groups” over other “out-groups.” Could it be that having weaker social ties in this area causes people to hold onto their regional ties with greater zeal? Is it the reverse or alternatively, do both reinforce each other? Casual relationships are not so important here; what matters is that that regionalism continues to exist.

The mix of migrants into a new area is problematic for many who feel a sense of entitlement to this space, even if they themselves are migrants and not native inhabitants. As my conversations revealed, the need to preserve “our land” and “our group” is a common sentiment throughout my interviews. For instance, some southern migrants feel that Hồ Chí Minh City belongs to them and that the intrusion of some northerners or central migrants indicates an infringement of their territory. Through acts of deliberate discrimination, such as outright mocking one’s accent, to more subtle discrimination such as body language, tensions and anxieties stay high. Even migrants from northern and central regions fall victim to these discriminatory practices and as a result, cannot help but feel excluded, insecure, and self-conscious about fitting into this area. These reactive anti-social and reclusive behaviours among minority groups further alienates individuals and makes community-building and social coordination even more difficult to achieve for individuals themselves as well as the government’s attempt to bring people together. The migration process has therefore created substantiated anxieties over a loss of cultural distinction and regional identity. To preserve this, people try to hang on to their cultural traditions and ways of life that threaten to die out, and a group of disjointed and disaffected individuals emerge.

What are the underlying reasons for this preoccupation with those who are “closer” to “us” geographically, culturally, and perhaps ethnically? As Appadurai (1986) has cogently observed, “though all anthropologists traffic in ‘otherness,’ we may note that it has always been true that some others are more other than others” (1986: 357; emphasis added). Drawing upon Dumont (1970) in a later article, Appadurai (1988: 41; emphasis in original) identifies three problematic trajectories which share the same power
structures that can be applied to regionalism among migrants in Bình Trị Đông. The first is the tendency to *essentialise* cultures and people in faraway locales. The second is the urge to *exoticise*, “by making *differences* between ‘self’ and ‘other’ the sole criteria for comparison.” The third tendency is to *totalise*, by treating certain features of a culture or society as its totality—as indicative of a particular *Geist* of those people. Although they may live in the city, not everyone who lives in the city feels a sense of “belonging” there; they may carry with them old habits and challenge assimilation and other native inhabitants may perpetuate social exclusion through their habits. These three oversimplifications are alive and well in the perceptions of migrants I spoke to in Bình Trị Đông. The challenge then becomes about how to overcome differences and to integrate people based on a shared experience and give them meaning and comfort in their communities in which they reside.

7.5 Creating Social Solidarity

The gap that exists between migrants and their community leads one to wonder how such a gap can be overcome. How then, posits Ash Amin (2006) in *The Good City*, do we “build a chain of solidarity out of multiplicity?” (1013). In place of such exclusive and short-sighted regionalism, Martha Nussbaum (1996) has advocated the reemergence of cosmopolitanism, in which one’s “primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world” (1996: 2). She argues that we should not allow ethnic or national differences to erect barriers between ourselves and other human beings. We all have natural allegiances to some groups. Usually it is first to our family, then to our community or neighbors, then to others of our nation, language group, or ethnicity. The task, she argues, will be to draw these concentric circles of allegiance closer together. While we need not give up our special allegiances, “we should work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, base our political deliberations on that interlocking commonality, and give the circle that defines our humanity a special attention and respect” (Nussbaum 1996: 12). One ideal starting point for such a project would be active local community projects to promote a sense of togetherness. Another is recognizing that increased participation requires institutional change that puts obligation on the government to initiate community-building projects.
Even with multiple self-interests, all is not lost and social cohesion can develop. For analytical purposes, Amin (1996) identifies four registers of urban solidarity that overcome multiplicity: 1) repair; 2) rights; 3) re-enchantment; and finally 4) relatedness. It is the concept of relatedness or the “habit of solidarity” (1016) or social connectedness of groups joining together as a collective force, he argues, that is essential to overcome the anomie and social decay of city life. His piece emphasizes the importance of building on differences and multiplicity that can be mobilized for common goals and wants (1020-1021). He writes:

> Cities are riddled with misery, anxiety, and desperation of the disconnected and excluded. They always have been. Now, however, there is a new scale and intensity of disconnection associated with mass migration of the world’s population to cities... The good city has to be imagined as the socially just city, with strong obligations towards those marginalized from the means of survival and human fulfillment. These obligations should draw on solidarity... The result is an equal duty of care towards the insider and the outsider, the temporary and the permanent resident.” (1015).

In Bình Trị Đông, overcoming such disconnectedness and building on solidarity as Amin prescribes is not so straightforward given the very divergent interests and social disconnectedness of inhabitants. Still, these ambitions of living together harmoniously is one that needs to be strived for, otherwise, social relations will continue to be empty and meaningless.

In overcoming differences, communication between residents as well as residents and their political community is essential to social cohesion. Anderson (1991) posits the sharing of knowledge and information as integral to the process of unification and the formation of political consensus. This suggestion is evident in a footnote where Anderson (1991) quotes Elizabeth Eisenstein: “Printed materials encouraged silent adherence to causes whose advocates could not be located in any one parish and who addressed an invisible public from afar” (35). Print-capitalism is the form of communication that “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (36). For the local government, disseminating information via widely accessible print information could have far-reaching implications for inhabitants. For local migrants and urbanites, doing something as simple as reading newspapers or staying informed by reading about new plans is an integral component of participating in an (imagined) community.
As I have tried to show, the dangers of social and spatial marginality, of non-belonging, of living in an area outside of the city with weak social ties can further alienate people and inhibit their willingness to forge communities. This may simultaneously discourage the government from getting involved (that is, assuming that the government has any interest whatsoever in creating a harmonious living environment). Social marginalization of “urban” dwellers on the urban fringe presents a complex problem for government on how to involve people but perhaps a better question is whether it is the government’s responsibility to manage this. With a high turnover of people who feel spatially and socially marginalized (from the city-centre and from others) the question of how to foster a sense of local community with fragmented and splintering identities becomes a challenge that has no easy solution.

7.6 Migration Policies and Government Action

Internal migration into cities has had deep implications for both the country, and specific to this research, for the social, cultural, and political dynamics of Bình Trị Đông ward. In terms of planning policies, the national Residency Law in 2007 offers a small glimpse into the wider political and social changes occurring in the country, and is just one part of a long history of the government’s attempt to move people (or to prevent movements as was the case of rural sojourners in the past). The story of migration has shaped patterns and processes of people in Việt Nam and in the last five decades where management of people has gone through a series of public policy changes. From a redistribution of the population into the countryside in the 1970s, to creating barriers for rural-to-urban migrants into the city in the 1990s, to the unprecedented surge of people into cities in present day, this new land law highlights the fundamental shift away from previously restrictive national and local policies to less controlled ones. The beauty of these new migration policies are that they are fostering a diverse mixture of people into one space, and none more apparent than the uniqueness of Bình Trị Đông ward itself. Although there has been a progressive change of migration policies in recent years, everyday lived experiences are not yet truly free of the stigma attached to these migrants. Even more apparent in my research is the regional discrimination that exists between migrants that works to further inhibit social interactions in daily encounters. Should
these exclusionary behaviours continue, this neighbourhood will be characterized by deep regional enclaves of groups who will make social cohesion that much more difficult.

Much of these feelings of social marginalization are related to the fact that only now are governments starting to realize the importance of designing areas that must accommodate the social transformations taking place. Having to plan for an entire area of migrants is not an easy task but is becoming increasingly important. It is no longer acceptable for people to be expected to function on their own. Leadership is now the pressing issue and local policies that promote greater inclusiveness are the new party line. Yet from my research, greater public involvement and sense of social community are not yet felt between people. Drawn in by economic opportunity and to a large extent, a modern urban lifestyle, most migrants have achieved financial stability but what remains worrisome are their weak social relationships. Although their main priority is to make money, and their lives are consumed by work and family obligations, the dangers of isolation and distant social relations between people in their immediate surroundings pose a fundamental problem. We are all interconnected and social links form the foundation of life. In John Donne’s famous words, “No man is an island, entire of itself” resonates today and the same story can be understood as a cautionary note here. In Bình Trị Đồng, most people are little islands, socially isolated from each other. Even after many years in this area and surrounded by so many others, the migrant experience in the city is rather lonely still.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Bình Trị Đồng: A Site of Change

This thesis examined social relationships of residents in peri-urban Bình Trị Đồng under the challenges of social relationships, community, and local planning policies. More specifically, this was an effort to understand the social and cultural changes occurring in this unique neighbourhood. Vietnamese society has undergone substantial changes since the introduction of the đổi mới reforms in 1986. Although migration is common throughout the country, this area is unique in that it receives a very large number of migrants who are gradually outnumbering the number of local urbanites. As such, urban change in Việt Nam has strongly influenced the dynamics of Bình Trị Đồng, creating a new set of social interactions between newcomers and long-time urbanites in this area. Thus the narratives shown here illustrate that this area is marked by a series of social, spatial, and institutional transitions whereby interactions between people must constantly be negotiated. Here, people’s identity is constantly subject to change in response to their surroundings because of institutional changes (moving from a rural commune into an urban district), social changes (frequency of people who move in and out of these dormitories), and environmental changes (rural to urban space) which all have some direct bearing on daily experiences.

Residents living in migrant dormitories (some for over a decade) express their social disconnectedness and feelings of alienation and isolation from others and their surrounding environment. My discussions tell me that place identity is weak among migrants. Community ties are loose and the “temporary” nature of nhà trọ may contribute to this loose connection. Although dormitories are quite livable, the social ramifications of this type of housing are quite considerable. Small, crowded dormitories mean a lack of privacy and housing that is not seen as permanent despite the number of migrants who lived in nhà trọ for a long time. Nonetheless, this does not change the fact that everyone needs a community, a group with whom they identify with, and if those communities are far away and not close by, people will become disaffected and indifferent to others. Everyone needs to understand their place in the world and in the community with others. Even if the long-term goal is to return to their native village, satisfying social relationships in the now with those around them is just as important. Not
to have that is to deepen feelings of spatial and social marginalization on an individual level; and without shared experiences to unite around, this results in a fragmented and splintered community on a broader level.

There are many factors that influence one’s feelings of social disconnectedness with others. Many migrants left their quê at quite a young age, and still uphold strong Confucian values of family. Plus the large amount of time spent at work to fulfill their financial goals leaves little time for all else. The picture is not entirely bleak however. Even though many residents felt distant from their neighbors, social capital was not completely mobilizing. Many relied on connections with family members and co-workers with whom they could trust. Despite many who reported that they felt lonely and sad, some had friends in the area with whom they reached out to by spending time watching DVDs or socializing after work to alleviate their sense of loneliness. Many residents are taking advantage of resources and infrastructure currently in place (which is always being improved, even if it is a private undertaking) such as communal courtyards or larger front entrances in these buildings. According to most, the general condition of their nhà trọ is quite good which contributes to more pleasant experiences. Additionally, it leads into the question of why we should expect people to give up their ties to family and friends in the village simply because they have moved. Maintaining a strong loyalty to people who may be far away should not be seen as so negative or the cause of eroding a sense of collective identity. Could it be that we are expecting people to integrate when in reality, this is not natural or desirable? Perhaps there is nothing wrong with maintaining strong ties to one’s village.

8.2 Local Leadership

The issue is not only how migrants’ identities shape community; indeed, community is shaped by external factors, specifically the crucial role of local policies. As we have seen, if left entirely up to the migrants themselves, social cohesion may not fully develop. Thus, the task of pressuring governments to take an active role in making more direct positive changes to facilitate togetherness is crucial especially since migration shows no signs of slowing. Neighborhoods are vital areas of change but limited by their institutional capacity to host change (DeFilippis et al. 2006). In such a
decentralized country such as Việt Nam, the role of different layers of government becomes even more pressing as they have more direct power to shape the area. Much of this is related to the fact that only now are governments starting to realize the importance of designing areas that must consider the social transformation taking place. Having to plan for an entire area of new groups is not an easy task but is becoming increasingly important.

Although many question whether their policies (such as Decree 29) may have a direct, immediate effect on the lives of migrants, their actions will establish a foundation from which to build. Hence, my discussions with Mr. Kien were to illustrate that social planning, living arrangements, spatial environment all have an immediate relationship on the migrant experience. A straightforward understanding of community as driven and created by migrants overlooks the shortcomings of government to provide strong social apparatuses that are needed to support and sustain social involvement. These migrants, who occupy an ambivalent space somewhere in between the rural and urban divide, need support from powerful authority figures who are truly in touch with the needs of residents. The government must learn to balance external demands of attracting industrial development to the internal demands of the residents whom without, such an area could not exist. What is worrisome is that if nothing is done, people will continue to feel like outsiders and social responsibility towards others will remain weak.

What, then, is the task of institutional bodies to put social cohesion, a sense of community togetherness and pride into one’s neighbourhood? One starting point would be the active role of government to create spaces where positive interactions between people could flourish. Building public facilities close to home which people could use as a refuge would be of value in this area. By this I am referring not to cafés or paid amusement parks, but harmonious areas that are reserved for free, non-discriminatory use by the public as suggested by Ash Amin (2006). Although there is a large amount of unoccupied public land, used public spaces in Bình Trị Đông can be rather small, in poor condition, neglected, or require money to access which only discourages people from using them. Not having attractive or usable common places may contribute to the deep regional divide between groups because there is limited opportunity for contact between others outside of work. The task of creating infrastructure provisions and amenities costs
money and given the immediate upgrade and repairs needed for existing roads as well as mega-projects already in place for new roads, community-building falls low on the priority list. However, if the local government continues its plans of attracting people inwards, then they must initiate places where solidarity can emerge, where people can envision a future here and not just a temporary sojourn. And if the local government is truly as selective as it claims to be in attracting industrial developers, then private investors who build common areas for their workers, for example, would be given priority to create businesses in the area. Only by creating an area in which people feel comfortable can people then begin to imagine a future. Furthermore, in knowing that their stay will be longer in duration, migrants will take more pride in their space and will also make a greater effort to connect with others. Another suggestion would be to initiate small-scale neighbourhood projects that bring people together towards shared goals. A successful government that is in tune with the needs of the area will try to make changes to identify the needs and problems of these people. Once these are in place, motivating people to access these areas would be relatively effortless. People may be more amenable to community involvement if the structures were in place, thus making the transition from social marginalization into public involvement less of a daunting task. This can be done on a one-on-one level between people as well as in a broader sense whereby people can be brought together via a sense of community togetherness.

In closing, one could say that the crucial roles of identity and community guide the direction of this neighborhood’s social and spatial development. Rather than exploring a more general, macro approach, the thesis was largely ethnographic, seeking to understand the process of migration from an individual and human perspective: of migrants as unique individuals possessing unique life stories. The migrant experience is one attached to a particular life story and vision of their future—whether it is settling down in the city, returning to their native village, or a future that is still unknown. A young generation of migrants characterize this neighbourhood and thus will continue to be the trend under more relaxed governmental policies. The experiences of these migrants continue to attract a growing number of even younger migrants, all of whom will forge new sets of social interactions. This project then has necessitated a deeper
inquiry into a very interesting question: what are the long-term social and spatial implications of migration in southern Việt Nam? And with such a profound re-arrangement of people, will regionalism continue to prevail or more optimistically, will we see in these fragile places an increased tolerance of others?
## Appendix I: Profile of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Native Village, City, or Province (quê)</th>
<th>Duration of Residency in Bình Trị Đông</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>District Officials</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>D.O.1</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vice Chairwoman of Bình Tân District (Phó Chánh Văn Phòng UBND Quận Bình Tân)</td>
<td>Hồ Chí Minh City</td>
<td>12 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>D.O.2</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Vice Chairman of Bình Trị Đông ward (Phó Chánh Văn Phòng Phường Bình Trị Đông)</td>
<td>Bình Tân district, Hồ Chí Minh City</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td><strong>Landowners</strong></td>
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<td>L.O.1</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>C3</td>
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<tr>
<td>D4</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Metal worker</td>
<td>Trà Vinh</td>
<td>11 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>E5</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Phú Yên</td>
<td>6 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>F6</td>
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<tr>
<td>G7</td>
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<tr>
<td>H8</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Bình Thạnh</td>
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<td>S19</td>
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<td>Motorcycle repairman</td>
<td>Đắk Lắk</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Ben Tre</td>
<td>8 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>W23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Cares for child at home</td>
<td>Đồng Nai</td>
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<tr>
<td>X24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Y25</td>
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<td>Coffee vendor</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>B28</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Student &amp; coffee vendor</td>
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<td>Seamstress</td>
<td>Tiền Giang</td>
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