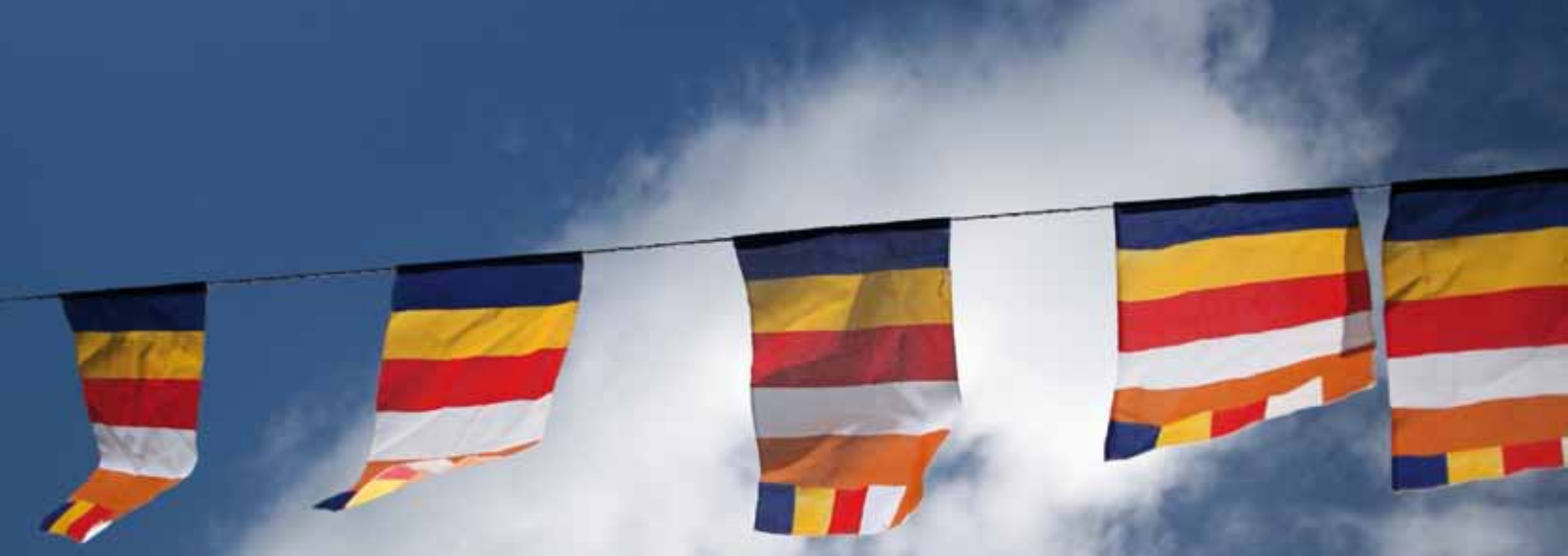

From Chanting to Chán:

About the Generational Gap among Vietnamese Buddhists in Switzerland

Frank André Weigelt

Source of all pictures: Weigelt 2010

Abstract: As a consequence of the wars in Indochina, thousands of Vietnamese Buddhist refugees have come to Switzerland since the mid-1970s. Today, there are 13,000 Vietnamese living in Switzerland; approximately 6.000 of them are Buddhists. Over the course of time, the first generation of these migrants established three pagodas in Switzerland. However, fewer and fewer of the young members of the second generation attend the pagodas today. The first generation fears the disappearance of their religion, traditions, and culture. In response to the lack of interest, the older laity is searching for a solution with the help of the Vietnamese Sangha. The purported solution is to practice more Chán (Zen) elements instead of sutra and mantra chanting, because many of the young no longer speak the Vietnamese language fluently.

The following paper is an extract of some research results from the author's Ph.D. project on Vietnamese Buddhism in Switzerland, a work that is still in progress. The author identifies problems arising between the first and second generation of Vietnamese Buddhists in Switzerland concerning their religious tradition and practices and describes how these people deal with them. The paper presents empirical findings collected during three and a half years of fieldwork and participant observation research in Switzerland.

The theoretical aim of the article is to provide a short analysis of how migrants of the first and second generations deal with the generational gap concerning their religious practices and which dynamics could be responsible for the changes of the religious needs among Vietnamese Buddhists in Switzerland.

Key Words: Vietnamese Buddhism; generational gap; Switzerland; religious dynamics; diaspora; migration

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(Im)migrants in a diaspora situation have to reinterpret their individual and as appropriate their collective identity within the new cultural context in which they live, as well as across national boundaries (Vertovec, 2009; Baumann, 2000; Hall, 1994). Religion, religious practice, and needs are often among the main identity-markers for creating a new and stable collective identity (Levitt, 2001). The emerging pagodas and cultural-religious associations are among the main focal points for a new and changing group identity (Baumann, 2000). The question is how (im)migrants of the first and second generation deal with the generational gap in terms of their religious tradition and which dynamics account for the changes of the religious practices and needs. In this article, the main focus is on Vietnamese Buddhist immigrants in Switzerland.

The data presented is based exclusively on qualitative methods such as (narrative-biographical) interviews and discussions in German and French. In addition to the authors archive studies on the incorporation of Vietnamese refugees in Switzerland since the mid-1970s, he undertook three and a half years of fieldwork and participant observation among Vietnamese Buddhists in Switzerland between October 2007 and the end of 2010.

The beginning of the Vietnamese Diaspora in Europe dates back to the time between 1946 and 1954 during

the first Indochina war (Lê Thành Khôi, 1969). Some students, members of the embassy staff, and merchants applied for asylum in European countries (Lê Thành Khôi, 1969). However, most ethnic Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese (Chinese citizens whose families had lived in Vietnam since generations) fled their country due to the various wars in Indochina between 1955 and 1979 (Vietnam War, war between Cambodia and Vietnam, Sino-Vietnamese war) (Ho, 2003).

Between 1975 and 1995, 8,000 refugees from Vietnam came to Switzerland as contingent refugees. The refugee population reflected the whole range of age, social strata, and gender (Weigelt, 2010). In the beginnings of this migration, most of the people came with their families. Later, people came by way of family reunification, marriage, and occasionally through labour migration. Today, more than 13,000 people from Vietnam live in Switzerland, approximately 8,000 of them have already acquired citizenship since 1991 (Weigelt, 2010). In total, they constitute 0.16% of the total Swiss population (of approx. 8,000,000 people). Although the resettlement of these refugees followed a highly dispersed pattern, there are three Swiss regions with a strikingly high number of Vietnamese refugees in the low-lands of Switzerland.

Over the course of time, three Buddhist pagodas emerged – one each in the regions of Lausanne (Canton Vaud), Berne, and Lucerne (Weigelt, 2010). It should be noted, however, that not all of the migrants are Buddhists. Some of them are Christians; some are followers of Cao-Dai, Hoa-Hao, Confucians or Daoists. Others simply practice the cult of ancestors, which may also be regarded as the fundamental religious practice of Vietnamese people (Lauser, 2008). Today, Buddhists make up approximately 50% of the entire Vietnamese population in Switzerland, while around 20% are Catholics. The remaining 30% are members of other religious affiliations (Weigelt, 2010).

Today, most of these people have lived in Switzerland for over 30 years. Some of them came as adults and some as children. This article will not discuss how the second generation should be categorized. When speaking of the "first generation", we refer primarily to those people came to Switzerland as adult refugees. The term "second generation" refers to those descendants of the first generation who were mainly or exclusively socialized in the country of immigration. The first generation introduced their religious practice in this case, Vietnamese-Buddhist practice – into the new context. In all three Swiss pagodas worshippers practice a traditional combination of Chán and Pure-Land Buddhism, which is part of the greater Mahâyâna tradition (Ho ,1999, 2003).

Introduction to Vietnamese Buddhism

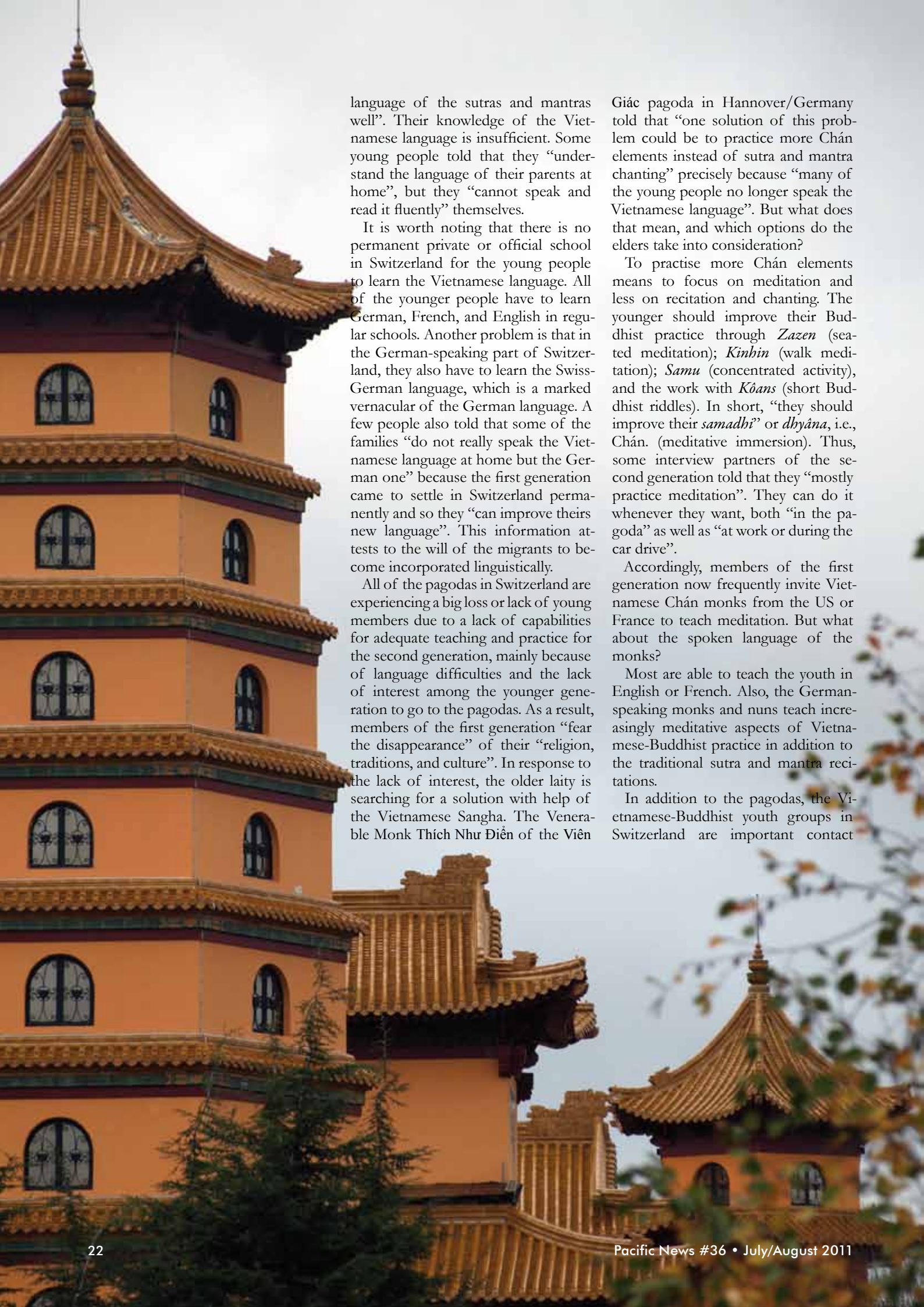
Buddhist practice came to Vietnam between the first and second centuries CE (Berchert & Duy-Tu, 1970; Ho, 2003). During almost 1,800 years of history, the Buddhist practices and teachings in Vietnam have adapted to country-specific customs and traditions and developed into an autonomous tradition of religious practice and teaching – a popular religion (Ho, 2003). Besides the connection between the two Buddhist schools of Pure Land (*Tịnh độ tông*) and Chán (*Thiền tông*), Vietnamese Buddhist practice includes many elements of the Vietnamese path of ancestor worship (*Đạo thờ cúng tổ tiên*), of hero worship (*Huyền Thoại Anh Hùng*), Daoism (*Đạo giáo*), and Confucianism (*Khổng giáo*) as well as the worship of guardian deities (*Tín ngưỡng thờ Thành Hoàng*) (Berchert & Duy-Tu, 1970). Daoism and Confucianism came to Vietnam as part of an ongoing cultural and political interaction with China (Ho, 2003). There was a great and sustained influence between the respective teachings and practices. Therefore, many respondents referred to the concept of *Tam giáo* – "the three teachings" or "the three teachings are one".

Contemporary Vietnamese-Buddhist practice is primarily inspired by the ideas of the Chinese monk and Buddhist modernist Taixu (1890-1947) (DeVito, 2009). Until the beginning of the 20th century, Buddhist doctrine and practice in Vietnam was marked by an increasing decline and of minor importance (Ho, 2003). Inspired by the work of Taixu, Vietnamese-Buddhist reformers revitalized their religious practice since 1920 (DeVito, 2009). In theory and practice, the teachings of the Pure Land School (*Tịnh độ tông*) were emphasized, and the laity activities were strengthened (DeVito, 2009). The acquisition of religious merit was and is one of the main religious practices in order to gain a better rebirth – most prominently in the Pure Land of Buddha Amithaba (*A Di Đà Phật*) (Ho, 2003). This means that the adoration and recitation of the names of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas occurs mainly through recitations of sutras and mantras (Ho, 2003). Good works are also regarded as important (Baumann, 2000). The main reason for this action is the assumption that the attainment of nirvana in life is almost impossible for lay people, and therefore the main focus is on the attainment of a better rebirth (Baumann, 2000).

Empirical findings

The people concerned in Switzerland mostly practice their religious tradition twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. Provided they do not have to go to work, they go to the pagodas. The chanting of sutras and mantras is done in Vietnamese language only. Based on the author's field research in the Swiss pagodas, it can be said that the majority of practitioners are elderly ladies as well as some men (Soucy, 2009). The second generation is hardly represented. What are the reasons for this demographic among religious practitioners?

The author interviewed many people from the 1st and 2nd generation. One of the main reasons seems to be the "language difficulties" of the second generation. Most of them do not have very good Vietnamese skills or simply "incomplete knowledge of the Vietnamese language". Most of the younger interview partners were born and socialised in Switzerland. They are between 16 and 32, years old, are still in school, employed, or in an apprenticeship. All of them were asked about their religious affiliation. Some of them told that they "do not belong to any religion", but if they had to decide, most of them "would be Buddhists". When they were asked why they do not belong to a religion or why they do not practice Buddhism, the most common answer was they "had simply no time or no interest". A frequent response was that respondents "have to go to school", to work, and meet their friends. Another answer was that they do not practice Buddhism with their parents or at the pagodas because they "do not understand the Vietnamese



language of the sutras and mantras well". Their knowledge of the Vietnamese language is insufficient. Some young people told that they "understand the language of their parents at home", but they "cannot speak and read it fluently" themselves.

It is worth noting that there is no permanent private or official school in Switzerland for the young people to learn the Vietnamese language. All of the younger people have to learn German, French, and English in regular schools. Another problem is that in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, they also have to learn the Swiss-German language, which is a marked vernacular of the German language. A few people also told that some of the families "do not really speak the Vietnamese language at home but the German one" because the first generation came to settle in Switzerland permanently and so they "can improve theirs new language". This information attests to the will of the migrants to become incorporated linguistically.

All of the pagodas in Switzerland are experiencing a big loss or lack of young members due to a lack of capabilities for adequate teaching and practice for the second generation, mainly because of language difficulties and the lack of interest among the younger generation to go to the pagodas. As a result, members of the first generation "fear the disappearance" of their "religion, traditions, and culture". In response to the lack of interest, the older laity is searching for a solution with help of the Vietnamese Sangha. The Venerable Monk Thích Như Điển of the Viên Giác pagoda in Hannover/Germany told that "one solution of this problem could be to practice more Chán elements instead of sutra and mantra chanting" precisely because "many of the young people no longer speak the Vietnamese language". But what does that mean, and which options do the elders take into consideration?

To practise more Chán elements means to focus on meditation and less on recitation and chanting. The younger should improve their Buddhist practice through *Zazen* (seated meditation); *Kinhin* (walk meditation); *Samu* (concentrated activity), and the work with *Kôans* (short Buddhist riddles). In short, "they should improve their *samadhi*" or *dhyâna*, i.e., Chán. (meditative immersion). Thus, some interview partners of the second generation told that they "mostly practice meditation". They can do it whenever they want, both "in the pagoda" as well as "at work or during the car drive".

Accordingly, members of the first generation now frequently invite Vietnamese Chán monks from the US or France to teach meditation. But what about the spoken language of the monks?

Most are able to teach the youth in English or French. Also, the German-speaking monks and nuns teach increasingly meditative aspects of Vietnamese-Buddhist practice in addition to the traditional sutra and mantra recitations.

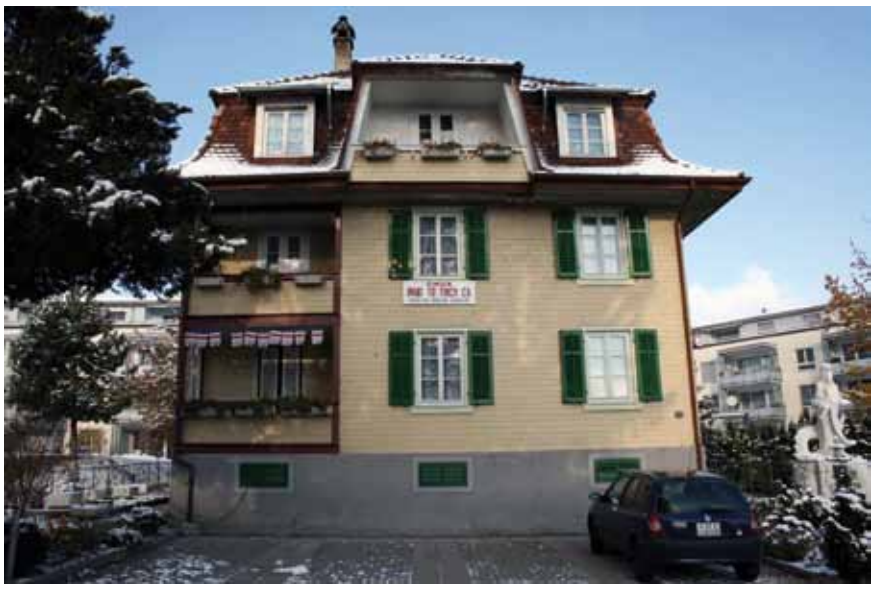
In addition to the pagodas, the Vietnamese-Buddhist youth groups in Switzerland are important contact

points and institutions for the second generation – mainly for those of the second generation who are interested in practising Buddhism regularly. In the context of the Vietnamese Buddhist revival movement since 1920, the Buddhist layman Lê Dinh Thám (Dharmaname Tâm Minh, 1897-1969) founded the precursory institutions of today's GĐPT (*Gia đình Phật tử Việt Nam*) (Ho, 2003). In Switzerland, two Vietnamese-Buddhist youth groups exist today: the GĐPT-Thiện Trí and GĐPT-Linh Sơn. The goal of this institution is mainly the education of young people in terms of Buddhism and their ability to participate in a social society in the sense of Buddhism. This means that older members teach younger ones in rituals and teachings of Vietnamese Buddhist practice and also in cultural aspects like folkloristic dance, cooking, clothes etc.

But what actually happens is the same problem as in the pagodas. "The younger members don't speak the Vietnamese language any more" to the extent needed to recite and understand the appropriate mantras and sutras. What is striking is that most of the members of the youth groups are adults who already have family themselves. Most of them were born in Vietnam and came to Switzerland as children or teenagers. They speak the Vietnamese language fluently in addition to French and/or German. But people who were born and educated in Switzerland often have problems with the Vietnamese language.

The youth groups deal with these issues by pursuing a different goal than the pagodas. The leaders are preparing for the generation change by using "more German or French literature" in addition to Vietnamese literature. They are also beginning to translate Vietnamese-Buddhist sutras or other texts into German or French. It is also noticeable that they are "very interested in the Buddhist practice of Thích Nhất Hạnh especially concerning Mindfulness (*sati*)".

Thích Nhất Hạnh is one of most famous Vietnamese Chán masters in the world today. He lives in Plume Village in France. But the members of the youth groups also emphasize that they are "only interested in the Chán practice and not in the doctrine of Thích Nhất Hạnh". To the repeated question why they are not interested in the teaching, they mostly gave the same answer: "The teaching of Thích Nhất Hạnh is incomprehensible from the perspective of a 'traditional' Vietnamese-Buddhist doctrine". Some people claim that his teaching of an "Engaged Buddhism is mostly aimed at Western people", for example "his interpretation of the Sangha", in which monks, nuns, and lay people are included.



Chua Phat To Thich Ca, Emmenbruecke

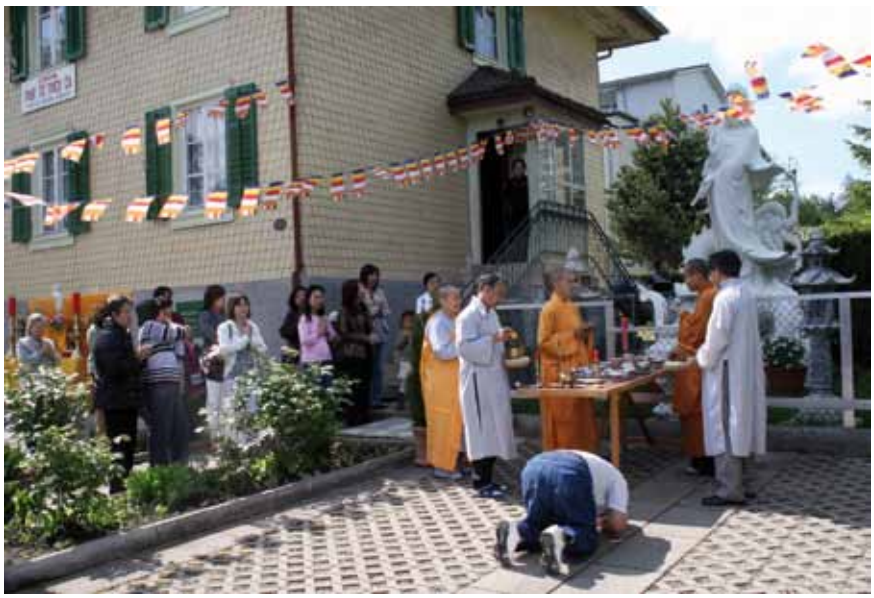
Analysis

The potential for change of the second generation is obvious. Many members of the second generation are socialised in the country of immigration, but, quite significantly, their socialisation happened mainly through their parents (Weißköppel, 2007). Consequently, they were able to establish ties to the country where their parents come from. Therefore, the second generation of immigrants is socialised through two different social systems and therefore "lives in two worlds" – in a metaphorical sense.

The second-generation experience of being socialised in two different social systems is a starting point for addressing the generational relationship. On the one hand, we have the aspirations of the first generation, who whish to hold on to the values, norms, and traditions of their home country. On the other hand, the second generation will manage their way of life in Switzerland. That means the second generation is in fact strongly influenced by their 'parent culture', i.e., the systems of meaning and significance of practices of the country of origin (Weißköppel, 2007). But they are also strongly determined through relations and practices together with theirs peers and the residence country. It is clear that neither of these analytical classifications – the parental and peer-cultures – can be regarded as homogeneous (Weißköppel, 2007). Nevertheless, in the case of the Vietnamese-Buddhist immigrants, and their descendants, we can refer in an analytical sense to two different ways of life and horizons of experience. This results in a shift in religious practices and needs. Responsible monks and nuns emphasize aspects of their religious tradition in educating the second generation. They mainly assert religious aspects, which have held less importance for lay people since the reforms of Taixu in Vietnam (see above).

The data presented shows the great extent to which religious orientation derived from the country of origin is subject to new dynamics from the country of immigration. On the one hand, the religious self-conception will change, while on the other hand, the religious identity has been revitalized in both the first generation as well as in some parts of the second generation.

At this point, the author would like to note that in recent years, Chán or Zen Buddhist practices respectively have experienced an enormous surge and won increasingly numbers of new members. Since the 1960s, significant parts of the European population, mainly in the German-speaking part of Europe, have shown interest in Buddhism (Baumann, 1998). The growing interest in Buddhist contents and practices is closely related to the social processes of change since the 1960s



Ceremony to value the ancestors, Emmenbruecke

(Baumann, 1998). One of the main out comes of the transfer of values at that time was that people increasingly felt free to choose and select their religious beliefs (Baumann, 1998).

The religious changes among Vietnamese Buddhists in Switzerland can therefore also be explained by postulating that the immigrant population share a similar religious need with those parts of the European population who are interested in Chán Buddhist practices. Both groups were and are confronted with a change of values, one through social processes of change within the European societies, the other through processes of mainly forced migration resulting in corresponding dynamics in the social and religious field of the sociocultural environment in which the migrants live.

Conclusion

Today, there are more than 13,000 Vietnamese immigrants living in Switzerland. Over time, the Buddhist part of the Vietnamese immigrant population founded three pagodas in Switzerland, in which they practice a traditional combination between Chán and Pure-Land Buddhism. All Buddhist texts are in Vietnamese language, and this is one of the main problems for the second generation or for those younger people who do not speak the Vietnamese language at all or only insufficiently. One solution for this problem could be to practice more Chán elements instead of sutra and mantra chanting in accordance with the practices of the venerable monks. To practise more Chán elements means to focus on meditation and less on recitation and chanting.

In addition to the pagodas, the Vietnamese-Buddhist youth groups in Switzerland currently have the same problems as the pagodas. In order to resolve the attendant difficulties, the youth groups have started to translate Vietnamese-Buddhist sutras or other relevant texts into German or French. In addition, they are also interested in Chán elements, mostly as developed by the venerable Chán master Thích Nhất Hạnh, who lives in France.

Analytically the potential of change is obvious. The second generation has been socialised within and in accordance with two different social systems, although most of them were born in Switzerland and have already obtained Swiss citizenship. The religious changes within the sampling unit can therefore be interpreted by postulating that the second generation of Vietnamese-Buddhist immigrants share a similar religious need with the many European people who are interested in Zen Buddhist practices. Both groups were and are confronted with a change of values, which creates the potential to a religious reorientation or to dynamics within the own religious tradition.

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