

**Vietnamese Immigrants in the Czech Republic:  
Hiring a Czech Nanny as a Post-Migratory Family Settlement Strategy  
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**1. Introduction: family migration and child care moves**

In January 2012 the magazine of the daily *Hospodářské noviny* printed an article about “Vietnamese Nannies”, meaning Czech women who look after the children of Vietnamese parents in the Czech Republic. The author writes that “*according to unofficial estimates, every other Vietnamese child has a Czech nanny. Instead of spring rolls these children love dumplings and dill sauce. One woman often went to the 24-hour convenience store to buy rolls, butter, and fresh milk, but one day she came back with seven-week-old baby twins. Their mother worked in the store from morning till evening and didn’t have the time to take care of the baby girls*”, as 67-year-old *Růžena Kopáčková* from Prague’s *Žižkov* quarter describes the moment when she came by her first Vietnamese grandchildren” (Procházková 2012). The case of Ms. Kropáčková and her Vietnamese twins is just one of the many episodes that make up the story of Vietnamese immigrants in the Czech Republic. This story is markedly different not only from that of Philippine nannies working in the United States or Polish domestics in Germany, but also from Vietnamese migrants to Canada, France, or Germany. At first glance the example of Vietnamese families hiring Czech nannies stands out in the context of the worldwide model of delegated care (for children and/or households) in one basic characteristic – while in the Western countries these tasks are carried out by migrants for majority families, here we meet with the opposite phenomenon, where the work is done by women of the majority society for immigrant families. The question is, to what extent do the relationships between the immigrant family and the nanny from the majority society correspond to the dominant model of migrant nannies in majority families? Is it the same model “stood on its head”, or a completely different dynamic of relationship?

Based on qualitative research on Vietnamese families and their Czech nannies, in this text I pose the following principal question: Why do Vietnamese families hire (Czech) nannies to look after their children? I do not seek to analyze the complex relationship between family and nanny, but try instead to describe the demand for nannies in the post-migration lives of Vietnamese in the Czech Republic. Analysis of the motivations leading to the formation of intimate relations of mutual dependency between the nanny and the family reveal the specific nature of this case not just in terms of reverse ethnic logic, but also in the context of the global Vietnamese diaspora and Czech society; and particularly in these three respects: first, Vietnamese migrants in other (European) countries do not look for nannies to care for their children, or at least none of the research has described any such pattern of relations.<sup>1</sup> Second, other immigrants to the Czech Republic do not systematically seek (Czech) nannies to look after their children (instead, the model common in other European countries applies here as well, where migrants – usually from Ukraine – work as housekeepers. Thirdly, according to official statistics only one to two percent of Czech households hire a nanny for their children (Hašková 2008); this shows that the model of paid care for children is not (so far) very widespread in the Czech context. These three aspects shaping the uniqueness of Vietnamese families both in the context of the Vietnamese diaspora, as well as the context of Czech society, indicate that the answer to the question of “why” it is necessary to seek in the nature of *post-migration life* (in contrast to the majority

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<sup>1</sup> My empirical data also provide testimony about the specific nature of the Czech Republic on the global map of paid care and the Vietnamese diaspora: some of my interviewees (children who had a Czech nanny) were born in Germany, and at an early age moved with their parents to the CR. These children had never had a nanny in Germany; their parents first sought a nanny for them in the Czech Republic.

population of *Vietnamese* migrants (contrast with other groups of immigrants) in the *Czech Republic* (contrast with other Vietnamese in other countries). This text tells the story of Vietnamese families and the reasons these families hire Czech women to care for their children as part of the more complex story of their migration and settlement in a new country. On the following pages I ask two mutually-related questions: first, why do some Vietnamese families in the Czech Republic hire *nannies* to look after their children? And secondly, why do some Vietnamese families in the Czech Republic hire *Czech* nannies to look after their children?

The literature on domestic and care workers, based on the dominant model in which the nannies are migrants and the customers are middle-class white families, tracks the motivations for hiring a nanny as one of the strategies for combining family and working life. The failing social states, which a few decades ago were criticized by feminist authors because they are founded on the family model featuring men as the main breadwinner, while women are the ones exclusively responsible for unpaid work in the household, have ceased to fulfil their role in many countries, thus giving rise to “transnational spaces of care“ (Widdig-Isaksen 2012, 2010). These transnational spaces allow rich families of the west/global North to outsource child care, enabling them to enjoy the advances of the feminist movement’s second wave (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). As critically observed by a number of authors (particularly Rollins 1992, Stenum 2010, Lutz 2011), the institution of paid child care allows only some women to avoid the so-called second shift, while for others it means working in the illegal market, and leads globally to the deepening of class and ethnic inequality among women, among different continents and countries on both sides of the global map of paid work. These approaches, however, are limited in their applicability to Vietnamese families and their Czech nannies. My main argument, which I will develop, is that Czech nannies are hired both in order to help reconcile family and working life, and to help manage family life in the context of post-migration settlement and the struggle for the continuity of family and private life.

The starting point for my considerations about the relationship between Vietnamese families and their Czech nannies, and the motivation that lead some Vietnamese families to hire a third person to help take care of their children, is an understanding of their family life. The family life of migrants has been the subject of a number of studies that have shown how life in the new country leads immigrants to reconcile their old and new ideas about family life (Kibria 1993, Foner 1997, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). On a general level Nancy Foner (1997: 962) writes that “the cultural understandings, meanings, and symbols that immigrants bring with them from their home societies are also critical in understanding immigrant family life. Obviously, immigrants do not reproduce exactly their old cultural patterns when they move to a new land; but these patterns continue to have a powerful influence in shaping family values and norms as well as actual patterns of behavior that develop in the new setting.” The author goes on to emphasize that the perspective of “cultural roots” as a key to the process of redefining family life allows us to understand the differences among various groups of immigrants (in this context for example why Vietnamese seek Czech nannies and Ukrainians do not). One subject of these negotiations is over the concept of child care. The modern anthropological theory of kinship emphasizes the formative role of care in the maintenance and reproduction of kinship/family ties and in defining what a family is, who is included in it, and who is not. Ever since the 1970’s, when the definition of kinship was unbiologized (Schneider 1984), scholarship on the issue has shown that ideas about the family are formed not on the basis of what is given, but what is done (see for example emphasis on the “kinning process“ in Howell 2006). This approach is applied especially in the second part of the work, which briefly outlines what is happening in the relationship between the nanny and the family.

## 2. Study design

This article relays the partial findings of qualitative research in fifty in-depth interviews were held with Vietnamese mothers, their children, and Czech women working as nannies in Vietnamese families. The research was carried out from spring 2010 to fall 2012 in some of the largest Czech cities (Brno, Praha, Opava, Zlín), as well as in the Czech-German and Czech-Austrian border regions, where the concentration of Vietnamese population is traditionally greater. In this study I focus on the following question: What are the motivations for becoming/searching a nanny? What ideas about child care are persistent in the relationship, what is their source and how they are articulated and practiced in everyday care? How the paid child care is contextualized in relation to family/kinship ties? In her prominent article about the “nanny question in feminism” Joan Tronto emphasizes three differing perspectives through which we can approach the nanny question: the perspectives of the families (mothers), the children, and the nannies. My methodological strategy was to cover all three of these perspectives in order to capture the complexity of the entire relationship, as well as the contradictions contained within it. Below I submit a basic description of my interviewees, as well as a description of the actors included in the triangular relationship of mother-child-nanny.

The *families* I met during the research varied widely, both in their experience of immigration, as well as (to a lesser extent) their current situation (employment and type of residence). The parents arrived between the 1980s (the era of socialist cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Vietnam; see below) and 2005. A large proportion of my interviewees came to the Czech Republic because they already had some relatives here; a frequent pattern was that the man came in the 1980s to study, returned to Vietnam where he married, and then came back to the CR with his wife (and children). The status of the parents depends on when they arrived: most of them have permanent residence permit; temporary residence permit is an exception. None of my informants (or their parents) had Czech citizenship, the reason being that they did not want it, and assumed they would return to Vietnam after the children are grown and are financially secure.

In selection of *children* interviewees I took into account two criteria. First was their age, which I limited to 16-23 years in view of the data collection method – in-depth interviews – and the nature of the research in which I was interested in capturing the *long-term* aspect of the entire relationship. The interviews focused on recollections of childhood and a description of their current relationship to the nanny. In doing this I am not working with “children” as an age category, but as a role in the relationship mother-nanny-child. A second criterion was place of birth. My goal was to carry out interviews with children who were born in the Czech Republic (first-generation nationals; a total of 10 of my subjects), as well as with children who came with or to their parents to the CR at the age of 6 or before (when mandatory schooling begins; altogether 10 of my subjects).

I carried out sixteen interviews with a total of fourteen nannies. All of the nannies shared one basic characteristic: they were dependent on the social state. The majority (nine) of the nannies were retirees receiving pension, two were on disability, two more were unemployed, and one was on maternity leave. As I will show below, these characteristics are key to understanding the entire relationship between the Vietnamese families and the Czech nannies. As to family status, four of the women lived by themselves (either divorced or widowed), and were thus the exclusive breadwinners in their household. Four of my child interviewees had a nanny who was active on the employment market – two were elementary school teachers, one taught pre-school, and one was a janitor.

The last, least-represented group were persons who are close to the Vietnamese “community” – they have experience with immigration, and their relatives, friends, or someone they know had sought a nanny in the past. The interviews had more or less an informational character, as these were the individuals who got me into contact with the previous three groups. My interviewees (who included five men; three of whom were among the children, while two were “gatekeepers”) were contacted through the “snowball” method. Most of the first contacts took place through the second generation – I addressed university students with the question of whether they had had a Czech nanny or knew someone close that had. Through the “children” I got to the nannies and parents. In light of the intimate character of the entire study I was forced to rely on recommendations to find people suitable for the research, and even more so upon *their recommendation of me* as a person who can be trusted. This was true especially with the Vietnamese mothers, whom it was not possible to contact ad hoc through the “market” (so to speak), and for whom I was obliged to rely on persons “inside”. The question of trust or mistrust was not the only obstacle that I had to face during the study. The atmosphere “in the field” was negatively affected by the media portrayal of the Vietnamese, which I sensed especially when several of the mothers refused to speak with me after previously agreeing to a meeting. Another reason that some of the agreed-to meetings did not take place was the parents’ busy work schedule; they simply did not have the time, energy, and will after a twelve-hour working day to chat with a curious researcher. The last problem that should be mentioned here was the language barrier between me, a researcher with no knowledge of Vietnamese, and my interviewees, whose knowledge of Czech was often limited. The interviews were therefore conducted through an interpreter, whose role in the research was not only not negligible, but active in the sense of interpretation and emphasis (Temple and Edwards 2002, Esposito 2001). Interviews with mothers were affected by what Bogusia Temple and Rosalind Edwards (2002) call the so-called triple subjectivity, the interaction between three actors: subject, interpreter, and researcher.

All of the interviews were recorded on Dictaphone with the agreement of the subjects, and later transcribed. All names used in this text are changed in order to preserve anonymity. Analysis of the interviews the text started when gathering the data, through transcription of the interviews, to open and focused coding of the transcribed conversations. The decision to study the care work relationship from three perspectives – mother, nanny, and child – was a great challenge for analysis, and the combination of various perspectives on the same phenomenon/relationship – perspectives that have their basis in differing social and cultural worlds. Analysis of motivations follows three main aspects: the view of the mothers as they describe their own motivations; the ideas of the nanny about what motivates Vietnamese mothers to hire a nanny; and the stories of children, whose accounts are more founded in real experience than the responses of the nannies, but who experienced the relationship from a different perspective than the Vietnamese mothers.

### **3. Vietnamese immigrants in the Czech Republic and their histories of migration**

In the interviews when asked my informants about their migration experience and/or the migration experience of their parents, and heard a number of different stories. A very common pattern experienced by many of the families in the study was described in the interview with Thi, a 22-year-old university student, who was born in Vietnam and came to the Czech Republic at the age of three:

My dad studied here in 1980s, then he came back to Vietnam and in 1990s the big boom of Vietnamese markets started so he decided to return here, this time it was Czechoslovakia. And me and my mum, we joined him in 1994 thanks to the family reunification permission.

These four lines of Thi's story sum up the basic experience of Vietnamese migration to the Czech Republic. The experience of migration to this country differs fundamentally from that of Vietnamese migrants to the capitalist countries that began in the 1970s. The geopolitical situation at that time produced two parallel streams of migration from Vietnam corresponding to the two sides of the Cold War. The turning point in Vietnamese migration to the CR and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was 1989, when the Soviet bloc fell apart and the nature of the migration to what was then still Czechoslovakia changed completely. Migration from Vietnam was thus shaped by two radically differing migration regimes: before 1989 in the context of state socialism it was a strictly state-managed migration between two socialist countries with closed borders (personified by Thi's father who studied in socialist Czechoslovakia); after 1989 it became a classic worker migration shaped by privatization and marketization (which Thi describes as "the Vietnamese outdoor market boom"; see Baláž and Williams 2007, Brouček 2003). As Baláž and Williams (2007: 43) remark, and as we can see from Thi's statement, the two phases were not autonomous or disconnected from one another; instead "the pathway(s) of the first phase migrants intersected with and informed pathway of the second phase – especially via social network and migrant-host community relationships – shaping opportunities and constraints for both groups." In the next part I briefly sum up the routes and roots of Vietnamese migration to the CR, and its consequences for the current situation of Vietnamese migrants in Czech society, as well as for the Czech nannies they hire.

The first contacts between the Vietnamese Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia go back to the 1950s, when the first bilateral treaty was signed allowing the arrival of around a hundred war orphans. In the years 1955, 1956, and 1957 treaties were signed on economic-cultural, scientific-technical, and cultural cooperation, which presaged important mutual cooperation between the two countries (Martínková 2006). They drew even closer in 1973 when, as Brouček describes (2003: 10, italics in original) – "*the Vietnamese side became very significantly more active* in urging the Czechoslovak side to accept increased numbers of Vietnamese laborers and give them education, training, and subsequent experience in various trades on a larger scale than previously. That same year a Vietnamese government delegation travelled around to the allied countries of the Eastern bloc with their request for assistance with specialized training for their citizens. They asked the CSR to train some 12 000 apprentices; however, this request was turned down as unrealistic (Brouček 2009). A year later 5000 apprentices aged 17-25 arrived in Czechoslovakia. Their stays were divided into several phases, from a six-month language course to a three-year study stay, and up to three years' practical experience in the factories, where 60-70 % of the students later had the opportunity to work under the same conditions as Czech workers (Brouček 2003). The benefit of the latter stage benefited the CSR by providing more workers for the metal industry, construction, and energy, where there was a shortage of labor.

As cited in the Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia referred to by Williams and Baláž (2005: 536), the "fraternal assistance" between Vietnam and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was supported by a package of 844 million USD. Subsequent agreements in 1976 – 1980 between the individual countries further reinforced this fraternal cooperation. The integration of Vietnam into the Soviet bloc was cemented in July 1978 when Vietnam became a member of the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance. Agreements to raise the numbers of internships and students in Czechoslovakia peaked in 1980 – 1983 at around 30 000 people. In the mid-1980s the previous treaties expired, and agreements were made to gradually lower the numbers of Vietnamese; by 1985 there were only 19 350 Vietnamese in the CSR, of whom 15 000 were men. By the end of the 1980s they were down to one-third of their former numbers.

The year 1989 was the major turning point. The disintegration of the existing partnership, the disappearance of jobs and the difficulty of finding new ones on the regular labor market, threw the Vietnamese living in Czechoslovakia into uncertainty in terms of their future life/migration strategies. They were presented with three alternatives: return to Vietnam, secondary migration to a neighboring country, or legalization of their residence in Czechoslovakia. As Brouček (2003) shows, despite financial compensation by the government for Vietnamese working in factories which were no longer able to pay them during a time of economic transformation, the pressure to return to Vietnam was inconsistent. Many of them chose secondary migration to Germany, Holland, or Austria. Those who wished to stay in Czechoslovakia had to find a way to formalize and legalize their residence. One of the solutions was to found a limited-liability company and get a business license, which they could use to obtain permanent residence permit (Brouček 2003, Nekorjak a Hofirek 2009).

In the early 1990s in Czechoslovakia (and then the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and the post-1989 collapse of production, a new chapter began in the lives of Vietnamese and the Vietnamese migrant community. Legalization of residence through business license proved to be a good strategy that paid off in a specific sector: trans-border petty trading. Rising consumption, but limited international trade, led to gaps in the clothing market, which were filled by newly-appearing small businesses that made up for insufficient domestic production and too-expensive imported goods (Williams and Baláž 2005). Sales of textile and assorted products became the core economic activity by Vietnamese after 1989, followed by other business activity such as translating, publishing, groceries, etc. (Hofirek and Nekorjak 2009). Professional concentration is one of the main features of the Vietnamese population in the CR, where at present out of 60 000 immigrants, 36 000 hold a business license (25 000 men and 11 000 women).<sup>2</sup>

From the early 1990s onward the original core of the immigrant community grew continually to include Vietnamese from other countries, particularly Germany, where the agreements ended in 1993 and the German government after compensation forced many Vietnamese to re-emigrate (Brouček 2003). Others came from Poland and Slovakia, as well as newcomers from Vietnam. Nevertheless, some of *newcomers* are not new to the CR – in many cases these are people who were trainees and students before 1989, and have experienced life here. Another formative characteristic of the migration flows was the legal clause to allow reuniting of families under which the majority of Vietnamese women come to the CR; the original pre-1989 migration was strongly male-dominated, “gendered around the discourse on training men in socialist ways of work” (Williams and Baláž 2005: 537). Already-settled immigrants also sponsored their friends and relatives, while other newcomers arrived independently of any family/kinship networks. What was previously state-managed migration changed fundamentally and took on the form of classic work-related migration, very often channeled into trading, which combines “welfare maximization and risk minimization” (Baláž and Williams 2007). The work-related nature of the migration can also be seen in the demographic structure of the population. Compared to other groups of immigrants, the demographic structure of Vietnamese immigrant group is progressive, with high percentage of women and children. According to the Czech Statistical Office, in 2005 21 % of Vietnamese population were children 0-14 years old (in the Czech population 15 %). 78 % of the population are of productive age (age of 15 – 64) and only 1 % were people older than 65. And it is the employment and demographic structure of the Vietnamese immigrant population

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<sup>2</sup> The 60 000 Vietnamese make them the third-largest group of immigrants to the Czech Republic, which has a population of 10.3 million. Of these 430 000 are foreigners, with Vietnamese make up some 15 % of the immigrant population and 0.6 % of the population overall.

that is the key structural pre-condition shaping family life and the demand for Czech nannies, which will be the subject of the next section.

#### **4. Changes and challenges to post-migratory family life**

My main source of inspiration for trying to understand why Vietnamese immigrants in the CR hire nannies to watch their children is the work of Nazli Kibria from 1993. In her study of Vietnamese immigrants in the USA suitably entitled “Family Tightrope”, the author follows generational and gender relations of families settling there. She describes how the new economic and social context in which these families find themselves produces complicated family situations (the family tightrope) balancing between the Vietnamese and American cultures, and leads to complicated negotiations over the meaning of family, the household, and relationships within it. In what follows I put forward an argument that the recruitment of nannies in Vietnamese families is part of the complex process of settling the family, balancing between here and there, between then and now, and negotiating a family life, including the ways of caring for children in the new country. I focus here on three main turning points brought by the arrival in a new country: the change in work environment, which raises the question of *how to combine work and family life*; on a (transnational) balancing between two cultural worlds, leading to a *rethinking and combination of family models from the country of origin and the current country of residence*; and the displacement from the social network, which presents the dilemma of *how to deal with the new family situation without the support of the broader family*. The result of the combined effect of these three factors is a new constellation of relationships within the family, which results in the decision to hire a Czech nanny.

##### **4.1 “We’re here to work”: working life as the alpha and omega of the migration project**

In the initial phase of research in the spring of 2010, I received a contact for Ms. Veselá (born Nguyen), a woman from Vietnam who came to the former Czechoslovakia before 1989, married a Czech, and works at present as a translator into Czech and Vietnamese. When I called her with my request for an interview, she agreed immediately, and gave me the following instructions: “Let’s meet tomorrow and I will take you somewhere where you’ll understand why Vietnamese do this”. The next day Ms. Veselá picked me up at the agreed place and took me to Brno’s biggest outdoor market. We walked among the stands selling clothing and food, operated by Vietnamese people of all ages and family status, to a small fast-food place, where we ordered strong Vietnamese coffee. As we were drinking the coffee Ms. Veselá told me to look around carefully, and asked, “Now you understand it all, don’t you?” And I at that point I realized that the commitment of their work on the part of small business owners should be understood as the main reason why Vietnamese families hire women to watch their children. In case I had any doubts, Ms. Veselá explained in detail:

Generally, the Vietnamese are taught that people of productive age must work, and being on maternity leave is not work. Everybody must work, parents, grandparents, and older children and kids have all done it since childhood. Here [in the Czech Republic] they have their shops, they are entrepreneurs, so that they do not want or they cannot close the shop. For them, when the shop is closed, the goods are not sold, there is no profit, and the clients do not come again. It is impossible to close the shop for a week or two and go for a holiday with the family. They are able to pay education for their kids; they send them to England for three weeks to learn English, which is very expensive. They are able to pay for that; but to close the shop and go for holiday with kids, that is a waste of time, they would say.

Many of my other interviewees likewise cited work commitments as the most important reason for seeking a nanny. Thus my understanding of the role of the nanny in the lives of

Vietnamese immigrants began with understanding their work life, which coalesces around three common tensions that are often mentioned in interviews with children and mothers.

First is the tension between working in Vietnam and working in the Czech Republic. From the standpoint of their current employment all of my interviewees (including parents of my children-interviewees and employers of my interviewee-nannies) were part of dual-earner households. The majority of parents were self-employed owners of shops or outdoor stands (in which all of them either had their own shop or worked together in the same shop), one of the parents was a translator, and one married couple worked in a factory. Nevertheless it would be misleading to consider the creation of a dual-earner household as a manifestation of geographical mobility and improvement of life in the host country. What Ms. Veselá describes when she says that the Vietnamese learn that everybody must work when they are of productive age, is a repeating statement that I have heard from many of my interviewees. The “natural diligence” of Vietnamese immigrants in the Czech Republic is interpreted either as a result of Confucian philosophy or, more often, as a reaction to experience with war and poverty. The dual-earner households are shaped previously in Vietnam before arrival to the Czech Republic; however, for both men and women, work life radically changes after crossing borders. Above all, there are qualitative changes in work biographies when immigrants shift from their previous professions (whether skilled or unskilled) and become entrepreneurs in the immigrant economy. For them, being part of immigrant economy is connected with a process of de-skilling. In addition, the new occupational position requires quantitative changes in work life, and leads to its intensification at the expense of private life, as the logic of “close the shop and you will earn nothing” shapes the meaning of labour, especially in a time of economic crisis. The interviewees experience what Wall and José (2004) called pressures *to* work – as the migration project aims at maximizing the income – and pressures *from* work such as atypical or long hours, and the pressure not to miss work.

The second tension is closely connected to the first, and encompasses the adjustment of being Vietnamese and working in the Czech Republic. Besides stating that “if I were in Vietnam, I would work less”, the interviewees also declare that “if I were Czech, I would work less”. If the goal of migration is to ensure a better future for the children, work is the means to achieve this goal. Vietnamese parents must work more than Czech parents because the former’s children enter the society with the stigma of foreignness. Ms. Ho made the following comment which expresses the link between parents’ work life and the children’s future: “We are foreigners here, and it will be difficult for them to prove that they are not worse than others. We want them to have better life than we currently have.” Paying for private education, additional courses after school or holidays in English-speaking countries (as noted by Ms. Veselá) – all financially very burdensome activities – are considered the main means of doing the best thing for the children, as well as for the parents’ own future, in which the education of the children reflects the status of the family (see also Kibria 1993).

The third tension is much more reflected in the statements of my interviewee-children, and captures the nature of balancing everyday life between work and family. This is the tension between working versus living in the Czech Republic. Many research studies have reported that these families experience conflict between work and child care, and that they “have so much to do that they feel they have a hard time managing everyday life” (Forsberg 2009: 162). Ms Veselá’s statement, which was very much echoed in the interviews with children, demonstrates that for Vietnamese immigrants *everyday* life is *work* life. For sacrificing their private lives to earn money, the Vietnamese parents are both admired and castigated by their children. The struggle for family life is conducted when parents negotiate work-life strategies built upon the patterns learnt in Vietnam, but played with the cards dealt out in the Czech Republic. These efforts to reconcile the two are understood and experienced



differently by parents and children: for the parents the Czech Republic is a place of *work*, while for the children it is the place of *life*. The pervasive ambivalence of a family life overwhelmed by work life reflects the fact that parents are in the Czech Republic *because of* and *for* their kids; however, they are not here *with* them.

#### **4.2 “We are strangers here”: the cultural baggage of care arrangements**

Nazli Kibria (1993) emphasizes that immigrants in the new country reconstruct their family lives on the basis of their “cultural baggage”: the experience, ideology, and understanding of the world brought with them from their country of origin. In this text I postulate that part of this baggage is the model of child care; in other words, ideas about what child care should be and how it should be carried out, which are confronted with structural opportunities and obstacles in the new society. This is shown for example by Lise Widdig Isaksen (2010) in her analysis of transnational care practices, when she describes how Ukrainian migrant women contrast care strategies in the country of origin with strategies in the host country, and shows that they prefer the practices that are normal in their homeland. In this section I will thus illustrate how Vietnamese families metaphorically “unpack” their cultural baggage and adapt to the new environment. First, however, we must look at what this baggage contains; that is, the ideas about caring for children that the Vietnamese migrants bring with them.

When I asked my mother-interviewees how they would handle child care if they were in Vietnam, most of them named three logical possibilities: they could stay home, put the child into day care, or find a third person. The first possibility, to stay home, was described by my interviewees as the least realistic for them personally, as the privilege of the rich, where the husband is able to provide for the family himself. The early return of mothers to the work force in Vietnam is given by the length of paid maternity leave. This ranges from four months (for the normal type of employment), to five months (for the type of jobs that entail a dangerous environment or difficult shifts, for example women police or soldiers), up to six months (if the woman is physically handicapped). Women receive 100 % of their pay and afterwards can apply for unpaid leave (Nguyen 2012: 7). This model of maternity leave produces demand for both formal and informally delegated child care. Formal child care in Vietnam is provided by a relatively dense network of private and public schools and centers – nursery schools (for children aged 3 months – 3 years), kindergarten (3 – 5 years) and pre-primary schools (5 – 6 years). As Nguyen concludes, however, despite the density of this network the majority of families with children up to 3 years old rely on informal child care – richer people (mostly in urban areas) pay for nannies, while others rely on the grandparents.

After coming to the Czech Republic, Vietnamese migrants – accustomed in their home country to four-month paid maternity leave and a strong network of pre-school child care facilities – find themselves in a social state which after 1989 has pursued re-familization policies (Sirovátka and Saxonberg 2006, Lister et al 2007). As Sirovátka and Saxonberg (2006: 185) argue in their analysis of post-1989 family policies development, “when the communist walls came tumbling down, Central European women found themselves in a historically unique situation. On the one hand, they experienced the highest employment levels in the entire world, with only the Scandinavian social democratic countries coming close. On the other hand, in contrast to the Scandinavian countries, little discussion arose about the need for men to share in the household and child-rearing chores. As a result, the household remained strictly the domain of the woman.” What are the signs of this re-familization, and what impact does it have on the lives of Vietnamese families? In the Czech Republic as well as in other Central and Eastern European countries, there are two types of paid family leave. First is maternity leave benefits which have remained unchanged during the transformation, and are now available for 28 weeks, with a replacement rate of 69 % in the

Czech Republic (Sirovátka and Saxonberg 2006). The second, so-called family leave, can be taken by parents until the child is up to four years old. An explicit re-familization policy is further evident in the reduction of state aid of nursery schools for 0-3 years old children. The number of these facilities has fallen since 1989 from 1043 facilities able to serve 40 000 children to 45 facilities intended for less than 1500 children. In addition, the majority of these facilities are located in the larger towns; in the border regions, where the concentration of Vietnamese is high, there are few. However, the lack of nursery schools is not the only factor that shapes Vietnamese parents' child care decisions. Even in the districts where the child care facilities are available, the lack of flexibility creates an important barrier. Generally, the nursery schools are open till 5 pm, which is not convenient for parents who work until 8 or 9 pm. Even if they were able to place their children in nursery school, parents would need someone to pick them up and stay with them till they come from work. Thus it seems that the current daycare system does not serve Vietnamese working parents well.

To sum up, Vietnamese parents experience big differences between child care models in Vietnam and in the Czech Republic. In contrast to the model familiar to them from Vietnam (return to work after four months' maternal leave), now they must deal with a radically different setting. First, the relatively long paid family leaves as well as the negative mythologies around collective child care shape the discourse of what Ann Oakley (1974) called "myth of motherhood" in mid-1970s or twenty years later Sharon Hays named ideology of intensive mothering (1996) in the USA. The re-familization policy in the Czech Republic strengthened the idea/ideology of gendered division of reproductive labour, and created the model of the individual permanent carer (read: mother), which for the majority of Vietnamese immigrants is radically different from their previous conceptions about motherhood and child care. Secondly, child care facilities, which in Vietnam provide important institutional support, in the Czech Republic are either too far away, have no vacancies, or their hours are inconvenient. The final option, which would have been the main option back in Vietnam, is to delegate child care to relatives within the family.

#### **4.3 "We're alone here": separation from kinship networks**

Nguyet, a twenty-year-old university student, came to the Czech Republic when she was 4 years old. Before they moved to the Czech Republic, Nguyet's mother went to work immediately after a four-month maternity leave. Four-month-old Nguyet was taken care of by her grandmother, her mother's mother. When the family moved to the CR, her mother again had to take a job, and needed to find a *substitute for her mother* who had looked after Nguyet in Vietnam. And so she found her daughter a nanny.

The role of kinship relations in delegated care has been described in a few studies (such as Utall 1999), some of which are devoted to the role of social/kinship relations in the post-migration harmonization of employment and family life (Moon 2003). The absence of a network of relatives impacts many areas of post-migration life; in my interviewees' accounts it is often spoken of in terms of a lack of economic and emotional support. Nevertheless it is precisely the question of taking care of children – in view of the important role played in childcare by grandparents in Vietnam – which is a major point of friction where the separation from kinship networks is most keenly felt. For Nguyet's mother, as for other interviewees, the hiring of a nanny represents an alternative strategy simulating the previous model of child care, in which the task is delegated to grandparents. To the question of "How would you deal with looking after the children if you were in Vietnam?" the majority answered clearly that the grandmother would take over for the mother when the latter must return to work. As one of the nannies tellingly put it, "They don't have their grandmothers here, so they have to find some".

The basic description of the relationship is that the nanny in the Vietnamese family supplements the mother and supplants the grand-mother (Nelson 1990). This leads to the potential formation of family/kinship bonds that are significantly different from relationships described in studies on care/domestic work (Anderson 2000, Hess and Puckhaber 2004, Búriková and Miller 2010, Akalin 2008).<sup>3</sup> These studies looked at the relationships that emerge between the nanny/domestic worker and the family as a pseudo-family, a fictive or false kinship, in an effort to show how the rhetoric of “one of the family” masks inequality and functions as a moral economy allowing families to demand unpaid overtime and so on (Hess and Puckhaber 2004). Nevertheless in the case of the Vietnamese family the family dynamics function differently, for two reasons in particular. The first is the differing logic of who is a member of which family: while in research abroad it is the nannies who become part of the family they work for, with the Vietnamese families it is the children (and sometimes to a lesser extent the parents as well) who become part of the nanny’s family, at the same time as the nannies become part of the family life of Vietnamese migrants. There are closer ties between *both families*.

A second reason is the change in family dynamics caused by the separation from relatives back in Vietnam. Kibria (1993: 8) highlights the impact of separation from kin on “shifting and expanding the criteria for inclusion in the family circle” and demonstrates how migration alters the substance of family life. For the Vietnamese families in my sample the main changes in these criteria are inclusion in the family circle of the nanny, who not only fills the role of grandmother, but becomes a grandmother. “Grandma” is not just a word that both parents and children use to address the nanny, but a performative determining her position in the family and relationship to the children she is looking after, which is based on everyday contact, the transfer of social and cultural capital, spending holidays and vacations, celebrating birthdays, and buying presents. For many Vietnamese children the Czech grandma has become the main anchor in the new society, the main caregiver and teacher, and “simply” the person who can be called “grandma”, and with whom it is possible to experience “typical grandma things” that cannot be experienced with their real grandparents due to the separation of distance.

## **5. Vietnamese or Czech: the ethnic logic of selecting a nanny**

The intensity of the work commitment, balancing between the Czech and Vietnamese ideologies of child care, and separation from the kinship network are the three main reasons why some Vietnamese families in the Czech Republic hire nannies to look after their children. Nevertheless these three factors still do not explain why Vietnamese families hire *Czech* nannies (and not Vietnamese or Ukrainian). This question will be the subject of the next section, which will examine the ethnic logic of selecting a nanny.

First we must inquire into the main characteristics of this work; we must ask about the content of the child care that Vietnamese families desire for their children. When a Vietnamese family takes out an ad for a nanny, it often looks something like this: “Looking for woman to look after our one-year-old daughter. Monday through Sunday. Nanny can look after child in nanny’s own home. Pay: 8000 CZK (300 Euro)”, or perhaps “Seeking woman to look after our six-year-old son – pick him up from school, help with homework. Monday through Friday, sometimes weekends and holidays. Pay: 6000 CZK (230 Euro).” This is to

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<sup>3</sup> The degree of intensity in the relationship; that is, to what degree a kinship relationship is formed between the family/child and the nanny/family of the nanny, depends on several factors: first, the age of the child when the nanny began, secondly the intensity of contact (whether every day/all day or just 3 hours a day for example), third, the nanny’s care biography (i.e. relations with her children/grandchildren and her relationship to children in general; see Souralová 2012).

illustrate that Vietnamese parents require of their nannies a major commitment of time for relatively low pay. While in 2012 the average wage was over 24 000 (920 Euro) and the minimum wage 8 000 (300 Euro), my nanny interviewees often looked after children all day or all week for an average of 6000 – 10 000 CZK (230 – 380 Euro) a month. Typical work as a nanny in a Vietnamese family thus involves long working hours for a financially small reward. All of the nannies acknowledged this, like Mrs. Křepelková, on disability retirement, who was working with her fifth Vietnamese family when our interview took place: “You cannot count the hourly wage. That is simply impossible. You have less than 20 CZK (0.75 Euro). And it’s deal or no deal. But if you like doing it, then why not?” In this short quotation, Ms. Křepelková refers to two essential aspects that predetermine the (self-) selection of a nanny. First is the economic side of *paid* child care; that is, the question of who can afford to work as a nanny in a Vietnamese family. Second, and more important, is the issue of *wanting* to become a nanny and *liking* the job. Keeping this in mind, I will now go on to answer two interconnected questions, which are: first, why do Vietnamese families not hire Vietnamese nannies to look after their children, and second, why do they hire Czech nannies.

To answer the first question: *why do Vietnamese families not hire Vietnamese nannies?* Three interrelated factors provide an answer. The first can be found in the demographic composition of the Vietnamese population in the CR. As I pointed out above, only 1 % are above 65 years of age. This has to do generally with the character of work-related migration (i.e. people of productive age are the ones who move here), and also the fact that many plan to return to their home country after their productive time is finished (see above). The first answer to the question “*why not Vietnamese women*” is that they are simply unavailable; there are few Vietnamese women of non-productive age in the Czech Republic. A second factor is the nature of the immigration project; that is, the fact that Vietnamese come to the CR and live here because of work. This means that even the above-mentioned 1 % of women are working and have no time to look after children. During my research I encountered only one example of a family that had the grandparents in the CR – but both of them were working, and during the week the children were taken care of by a Czech grandmother; the Vietnamese grandparents saw them only sometimes on Sunday. The last, but not least-important reason was the cultural (symbolic) value of child rearing and how it is valued in relation to work within the framework of the Vietnamese community. We can find this in the attitude towards the importance of maternity leave expressed by Ms. Veselá above. For the Vietnamese “maternity leave is not work”, as she emphasized during the interview; and to my question about what kind of Vietnamese women look after children, she answered, “women who don’t have better work than looking after some kids (...) and are incapable of doing business, so they have to do something worse that pays less.” To be a nanny in the context of the Vietnamese community is not work that is sufficiently valued, either from a symbolic or financial standpoint.

To answer the question of *why Vietnamese families hire Czech nannies* we must return in the context of the above to the basic characteristics of these women’s lives. The fact that these are women dependent on the social state makes them suitable and available candidates for these positions for two reasons: these women have sufficient free time, and thanks to the support of the social state (unemployment or retirement benefits) their needs for financial compensation are less. For these women working as a nanny is a side job, not the main source of income. Unlike Vietnamese women, they can afford to engage in this type of work. Besides the availability of Czech women, an important role is also played by the fact that they are Czech; that is, they can teach the children some things that their Vietnamese parents cannot. All the mothers and nannies I interviewed understood child care – no matter whether performed by mothers or nannies – not only as nurturance, but above all as the transmission of

social and cultural capital (Macdonald 2010, Bourdieu 2001). The natural teaching of the Czech language to children whose parents speak only Vietnamese, help with homework, the passing along of an authentic (as my children interviewees describe it) view into Czech culture, and help in forming social ties with members of majority society, were mentioned as the main reasons for recruiting Czech nannies.

## 6. Concluding remarks

In the Vietnamese community, having a Czech nanny is becoming the post-migration norm. While according to Hana Hašková only 1-2 % of Czech families make use of individual private paid child care (Hašková 2008), my interviewees report that the number of Vietnamese families seeking nannies for their children is around 80 – 95%. Most of them add that this is a “common”, “normal”, or “matter-of-fact” thing. Some of the nannies go from family to family, or are asked whether they have a friend who would take care of some friends’ children. But the opposite is also true, in that taking care of Vietnamese children has become the norm for some Czech women – several of my interviewees worked as nannies for a number of Vietnamese families in succession. Experience taking care of Vietnamese children in some cases sets off a chain of other nanny jobs. For example Xuan tells of how much her Czech grandmother cried when she and her brother stopped living with her (they lived with her from Monday to Friday, on weekends with the parents). Soon after they left, the grandma, who lived in western Bohemia where there is a concentration of (young) Vietnamese families, began taking care of other small children (much to the anger and jealousy of Xuan’s brother). According to Xuan the grandma was so accustomed to watching Vietnamese children that she couldn’t live without them, as they filled a void she would have otherwise felt without them.

The model in which Vietnamese families take on Czech nannies to watch their children can be seen in two different ways. First, it can be a *strategy for reconciling working and family life*, when a dual-earner couple needs a third person to take care of the children. Second, on the basis of my analysis I tend to lean towards the interpretation that for most of the interviewed families hiring a nanny *fulfils the ideal of the relatives in family life*. I am brought to this conclusion by the following two findings: First, in regard to the “unpacking of cultural baggage” (i.e. ideas about the family and child care), we can observe how Vietnamese migrants in the CR “simply do what they would do at home in Vietnam”. The formation of the dual-earner household is not the work of the migration project, nor is delegating child rearing to a third person – both of these customs are established long before migration. Finding a Czech granny is thus a simulation of the existing family model, adapted to the post-migration reality. In other words, the game does not change (in both the pre-migration and post-migration context with these families, the mother and father both work, and the children are looked after by someone else); under the new rules (life in the new country) only the players are changed (instead of a grandma the nanny comes in). Secondly, the relationship that arises between the family (mainly the children) and the nanny-granny is such that the nanny replaces the Vietnamese grandma not only in looking after the kids, but can become their “real grandmother”. Children often talk about having two different grandmothers, the Vietnamese and Czech, and about being closer to the latter, with whom they have shared time and experiences together.

The role of the Czech granny in many ways exceeds the role of the (main) care-giver. For example Hanh, a 17-year-old secondary school student, sums up the role of the *babicka* like this:

I can say that she gave me the feeling of home that time. Now she cannot give it to me anymore because I think differently about things. But before she was simply my home. I would have not left the Czech Republic because of her. You know, not because of my

friends or teachers at school that I liked, but because of my granny. Because my granny was here for me... she was the home for me.

Thus in many Vietnamese families the Czech grandmother plays an important role in the process of settling down in the new country – both for children and for parents. For a certain time the families are dependent on the Czech grandmother both socially and culturally. Social dependency arises mainly because of the parents' insufficient language skills. Thus until the children grow up and can manage everything themselves the nannies are the ones responsible for communicating with schools (even going to parent-teacher meetings, in some cases even signing the students' report card) or with doctors. In this way nannies pass their own social capital on to the children (and to the parents to a lesser extent), introducing them to their friends and relatives, substituting for their missing social network, and providing a certain foundation for the entire family. Cultural dependency is most evident in the passing down of language skills and Czech traditions and customs. The children themselves say that thanks to their nanny they are better integrated into Czech society – both through “learning the Czech way of life” (for example how to spend time at Christmas, how to go mushroom hunting), and – as the excerpt above shows – by helping them find a new sense of home.

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