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To cite this article: Ewa Grabowska & Grazyna Szymanska-Matusiewicz (2022) How an Immigrant Buddhist Institution Negotiates Belonging in Poland: The Case of Thiên Phúc Pagoda, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 43:3, 432-449, DOI: [10.1080/07256868.2022.2010677](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2022.2010677)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2022.2010677>



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Published online: 16 Feb 2022.



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How an Immigrant Buddhist Institution Negotiates Belonging in Poland: The Case of Thiên Phúc Pagoda

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ABSTRACT


Migrant religious institutions tend to be focal places of intercultural encounters, serving as spaces for performing national, ethnic and religious identities, as well as, dialoging and negotiating belonging within the majority society. Thiên Phúc, a Vietnamese-operated pagoda functioning in Poland, serves as an important factor in the Vietnamese migrant community affairs, at the same time remaining virtually unknown to a broader Polish public. Drawing on extensive fieldwork study results, we adapt an original perspective of a migrant religious institution as an active agent in negotiating belonging to various social contexts, namely the host society, the Vietnamese migrant community and the social space of Buddhist religious institutions. We point out to coherences and disjunctures between arguments formulated during the search for legitimisation from the diverse sources. We also reflect upon complex ways in which the negotiation strategies are related to Polish public discourse on the Vietnamese community, which tends to form two opposite arguments: one calling for better integration, the other for their isolation and invisibility. Doing so, we shed light on outcomes and limitations of particular strategies of negotiating belonging undertaken by an 'otherized' institution in the context of one of the most ethnically and religiously homogeneous societies in Europe.

KEYWORDS

Integration; negotiating belonging; Vietnamese diaspora

Introduction

A religious structure of the Vietnamese community in Poland mirrors the religious landscape of the northern part of Vietnam from where a vast majority of people originate. Those claiming no religious affiliation form the largest segment within the Polish-based diaspora, however, there are also followers of three mainstream institutionalised religions. While Buddhists constitute the largest religious congregation in the Polish-Vietnamese community, Catholics and Protestants reach about 400 and 150 believers respectively. Buddhists are, however, the only religious group within the Vietnamese community in Poland who managed to create their own public sacred space. Currently, there are two Buddhist pagodas operating in two villages south of the Polish capital city.

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Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the bigger Mahayana style two-storey Nhân Hòa Pagoda located 40 km away from Warsaw on average attracted 400–600 attendees during major festivities. Whereas the smaller one, Thiên Phúc Pagoda, situated 25 km away from the capital, attracted up to 300 people. Religious pluralism of belief is also reflected in the range of practice typical for pagodas in northern Vietnam which incorporate the Mother Goddess cult and worship of people with meritorious deeds to the country. While the pagodas play an important role in Vietnamese community affairs, they remain virtually unknown to a broader Polish public. In this article, we analyse aspects of the latter pagoda activity which were omitted or signalled in previous works (Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2019; Szymańska-Matusiewicz and Bossak-Herbst 2019).

Thiên Phúc Pagoda, operated by a group of Vietnamese Buddhists and led by a monk residing in Vietnam, is located in a small village of Laszczki in the suburbs of Warsaw. As an institution aiming to provide religious and spiritual services, it constitutes a space of intricate debates that focus on belonging to and exclusion from multiple social contexts. We analyse complex dynamics of relationships between the pagoda and its social surroundings, including the host Polish society, the internally diverse Vietnamese migrant community, and the social space of Buddhist religious institutions. Considering the integration paradigm – a continuing pillar of public discourse on immigration (Grzymała-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018) – the pagoda appears to be an example of a migrant institution that is poorly integrated with the host society. Our analysis of a complex and multidimensional process of negotiating belonging enacted by its managing group reveals, however, that Thiên Phúc Pagoda is indeed embedded in diverse social spaces that transgress ethnic boundaries of the Vietnamese community.

As argued by Probyn (1996), Skrbis et al. (2007), and Baak (2016), belonging consists of a dynamic set of processes including both being and becoming. Due to its inherently relational nature (Probyn 1996), actors striving for inclusion into certain social contexts seek legitimisation from those situated within them. We suggest that Thiên Phúc Pagoda – an institution established only a few years ago – has since its formation engaged in a ‘nuanced interplay of structural, relational, spatial and temporal embedding’ (Ryan 2017: 233) in multiple sociocultural and religious milieus to search for legitimisation.

Embedding in the context of the host society shapes the way a Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda performs especially in the case of Poland – one of the least diverse European countries both in terms of religious and ethnic diversity. According to the 2011 census – the most comprehensive source of data currently available¹ – over 95 per cent of inhabitants of Poland declared Polish nationality and 93.7 per cent adhere to the Roman Catholic religion (GSO 2019). And yet, within the last five years the number of documented foreign nationals rose to over 2 million as of 31 December 2019 (GSO 2020), of which the number of Belarussians and Ukrainians quadrupled, Indian nationals tripled and the Vietnamese almost doubled. The largest migrant group recognised as ethnically and culturally distant from the majority Polish population (Piekut 2012) is still the Vietnamese community² which has emerged in Poland as a result of Cold War Era connections between then-communist Poland and North Vietnam (Halik and Nowicka 2002; Halik 2007; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2019). While the existing literature discusses particular aspects related to functioning of the Vietnamese community in Poland, such as migrant entrepreneurship (Andrejuk 2016; Brzozowska and Postuła 2014; Grzymała-Kazłowska 2008), identity of second generation and family issues (Grabowska 2006;

Nowicka 2015; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2015), the role of religious institutions in the process of integration of the migrants did not so far received sufficient attention in the academic discourse.

The Vietnamese number is between 10,460 (OFF 2021) and 27,386 people (GSO 2020). However, public discourse constituted primarily by resonant media coverage often portrays them as an isolated and – therefore – mysterious community of which little is known.³ Results from a survey conducted in 2001 and reported by Halik and Nowicka in the first academic book dedicated to the Vietnamese community in Poland, ‘Vietnamese in Poland: Integration or Isolation?’ (2002) indicate that while a stereotype of the Vietnamese among the Polish population is rather weakly formed, those Poles who have developed a specific opinion perceive them to be primarily polite, tending to avoid conflict, refraining from criminal activity, as well as hard-working and enterprising. They are also perceived to be isolated from most of society, uncommunicative, and tending to keep their own company (Halik and Nowicka 2002). A similar picture can be drawn from a more recent study by Winiarska (2015) and Mayblin, Valentine and Winiarska (2016), who found that Poles perceived their Vietnamese neighbours to be hard-working and polite but at the same time refraining from engagement into closer contact.

The press discourse concerning the Vietnamese community in Poland and attitudes towards them tends to focus on two opposite arguments, each based on a different assessment of the Vietnamese stereotype. The first argument suggests the Vietnamese community should be better integrated with mainstream Polish society through actions of the community itself, Polish actors, or both. Most voices arguing for better integration describe the community as rather poorly integrated. The main economic centre grouping of the Vietnamese in Wólka Kosowska village is commonly portrayed as a kind of ghetto (Gierszewski 2014). Conversely, the press also depicts positive examples of good adjustment by Vietnamese people to their Polish surroundings (Szczerbowska 2015).

By contrast, the second argument does not embrace participation of migrants in mainstream society as a core value. It is far more important that migrants ‘do not cause any trouble’.⁴ This argument is consistent with the ‘invisibility bargain’ model of migrant-host society relations, in which the host society implicitly accepts foreign migrants as long as they maintain social and political invisibility (Pugh 2018). Accordingly, isolation of the migrant community does not pose a problem but rather reflects the desired state of affairs. Such arguments appear most common in comments and responses below press articles as well as in social media (image-sharing platforms).⁵

The discourse over integration/isolation of the Vietnamese community in Poland provides an important context for strategies undertaken by Vietnamese institutions seeking their recognition in a social space of Polish society, among them Tiêñ Phúc Pagoda. *Negotiating belonging* is a crucial concept on which we base the structure of our analysis of their search for recognition. While *integration* – a buzz word both in the academic literature and public policy in the early twenty-first century – has been most commonly used both in media discourse and academic literature to describe a place which the Vietnamese occupy in the Polish society, we decided to put a notion of belonging in the centre of attention. Integration, as Phillimore (2012) and Grzymała-Kazłowska and Phillimore (2018) noted, has become an increasingly normative concept affected by ‘assimilationist stance’ particularly when used in official policy documents and in public

discourse. The notion of *negotiating belonging* – which addresses evolving and processual nature of relations between actors and social contexts to which they adhere – enables focusing on the issue of how the right to be in a particular place is negotiated. Thus, we illustrate coherences and disjunctures between arguments formulated during an intricate process of negotiating belonging leading to acts of inclusion and exclusion that have been practiced by representatives of the Polish society, Vietnamese community institutions, and individuals.

The paper is based on the results of extensive fieldwork conducted from 2013 to 2020 in Thiên Phúc Pagoda and other important institutions of the Vietnamese community. We conducted eight formal, structured interviews and countless informal conversations with the pagoda managing board members, as well as representatives of other Vietnamese migrant institutions and related Polish Buddhist sangha (ordained clergy). The fieldwork involved more than 30 visits to the pagoda to participate in everyday routines such as crop picking, monthly prayers and lectures of visiting monks, religious and ethnic festivals organised in the main Buddhist hall, as well as, the Thăng Long shrine devoted to Mother Goddess worship. It also included participation in an organisational meeting with the abbot who has never resided at the pagoda but a few times a year either him or his disciples come to celebrate important Buddhist holidays and guide the adherents. Our study entailed help in organising and participating in numerous activities on the pagoda premises, such as school trips reception, and outside its location, for example, the Lunar New Year charity event. The research was supplemented by the analysis of internet resources related to the pagoda activity. Most importantly, the study was built upon our previous fieldwork within the Vietnamese community in Poland – conducted by each of us for more than 10 years – which enabled us to root our observations in a broader context of a complex network of Vietnamese migrant and host society institutions.

Negotiations of Space and Language: Overcoming the Barriers

In migration studies, migrant religious institutions have for some time been perceived as instrumental in the process of rooting newcomers into the host society. In the classic works of Herberg (1960) and Handlin (1973), churches, synagogues, and temples established in America by immigrants were portrayed as institutions that provide psychological support and comfort to people undergoing the traumatic experience of uprooting from their place of origin. One heatedly debated aspect in respect to migrant religious institutions is their (contested) role in the process of migrants' integration into the host society. While they have been portrayed as a pathway to integration by equipping adherents with various resources essential to adaptation (see Hirschmann 2004), they may as well offer a 'buffer' against the difficult process of integration by providing worshippers with bonding capital within their own migrant community, hence leading to their isolation (Bonifacio and Angeles 2010; García-Muñoz and Neuman 2012).

One way to determine whether a religious institution has a positive effect on the way migrants adapt to their host society is by applying indicators of integration. Multiple tools measuring integration have been utilised in both academic literature and public policy discourse (Ager and Strang 2008). In respect to migrant religious organisations, the following most commonly listed indicators seem adequate: social connections

within and outside their own community, settlement within a particular area (spatial location), and linguistic and cultural competence (Ager and Strang 2008). In the next section, we examine the situation of Thiên Phúc Pagoda according to the two latter aspects, while social connections will be subject to analysis throughout the entire scope of the paper.

While the Vietnamese have been arriving in Poland since the mid-1950s as a result of 'socialist fraternity' educational programmes, there was no Vietnamese site of worship in the Polish public space during the Cold War era (Halik 2007; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2019). No religious institutions were then created due to the temporary character of student exchange programmes and disapproval of religion that the communist authorities of Vietnam held. After the 1989 political transition, a pivotal role in the economy of Poland was played by the grey zone trade sector. Under the conditions of 'wild capitalism' informal international trade chains were developed which involved Vietnamese former students and PhD graduates of Polish universities as well as former contract workers from other Soviet-bloc East European countries arriving in Poland (Grabowska 2016; Hüwelmeier 2015; Schwenkel 2015; Williams and Balaz 2005). A subsequent influx of economic migrants from Vietnam who took advantage of the chains did not, however, immediately contributed to religious life in a public domain.

A breakthrough moment came in 2004 when Thiên Việt Pagoda came into existence. The first and only Vietnamese building dedicated to religious purposes in Poland was located in the immediate vicinity of the Decennial Anniversary Stadium (Stadion Dziesięciolecia), which at that time served as Europe's largest open-air market (Cichomski 2010; Szymańska-Matusiewicz and Bossak-Herbst 2019). It was situated close to Warsaw city centre on the right bank of the Vistula River, and yet – paradoxically – in a precarious area surrounded by warehouses. Their attempt to transform the only available profane space in the city into the sacred one is common for migrant communities worldwide (Garbin 2014). Thus, the pagoda was built on the premises of the Thăng Long cultural centre, rented by a Vietnamese businessman, Mr Bùi Anh Thái (alias Lê Minh Tân). A simplified version of the Hanoian One Pillar Pagoda and a small northern Vietnamese style pagoda marked the religious site. While the centre's high walls and security monitoring made it difficult for incidental passers-by to enter, they instantly created a homeland-like religious space for the Vietnamese. Consequently, only centre visitors – Vietnamese Buddhists and a few Poles interested in Buddhism – knew of religious activities taking place inside the centre. The preventive security measures tended to conform with Polish opinions of Vietnamese inclination for 'remaining invisible' or acting within their own ethnic enclave.

The decision of the Warsaw authorities to construct the new National Stadium, which required definite closure of the open-air market (Szymańska-Matusiewicz and Bossak-Herbst 2019), put an end to the pagoda after just six years of operation. The spatial dislocation of a worship area forced Vietnamese Buddhists to seek a new location for their religious activities, an experience common for migrants worldwide who are made to convert precarious or peripheral localities into their shrines, temples and churches (Garbin 2014). In the case of the Vietnamese community in Poland, it was the former owner of the Thăng Long centre who – following the decision to permanently leave for Vietnam – decided to transform his private residential villa in the village of Laszczki

(Raszyn municipality) into the seat of a newly established Buddhist Society of the Vietnamese in Poland (BSVP). After extensive renovation, the house started to serve as a religious site; the first floor became a provisional Buddhist altar featuring ancestral tablets on the side. It was called Thiên Phúc Pagoda and became fully operational in 2013 with three small shrines: a replica of One Pillar Pagoda, one of Hùng Kings, and one for Mother Goddess worship. As it is one of the two currently operating Vietnamese community pagodas, a section on Vietnamese Buddhist institutions in Poland sheds light on complexities of the transition process.

The peripheral location of Thiên Phúc Pagoda – approximately 25 km from the centre of Warsaw – is inherently related to a shift of Vietnamese economic activity in Poland out of Warsaw boundaries during the first two decades of the twenty-first century which shortly followed by residential movement (Piekut and Grzymała-Kazłowska 2007). The spatial location away from Warsaw in a typical residential area with detached houses along the road is undoubtedly an important factor influencing the process of renegotiating belonging into the new Polish spatial and social surroundings. It contributes to the further invisibility of the migrants. Contrary to the previous pagoda, the current place is inaccessible by public transport and the easiest way to get to the site is by car. The lack of alternate transportation constitutes a challenge for less affluent Vietnamese worshippers who try to overcome the inconvenience by joining their friends, relatives, or others willing to give them a lift. However, the scarcity of convenient public transport is not the only obstacle that hinders access to the pagoda. A signpost located in the main road of Laszczki village presenting only the One Pillar Pagoda seems incomprehensible for Vietnamese culture illiterates. Nevertheless, it leads a bit off Leszczynowa Street into the fields, where a huge colourful Buddhist-style gate with the Wheel of Dharma on its roof marks the pagoda premises. Practically, this location outranges the one of Thiên Việt Pagoda as it restrains even incidental non-ethnic passers-by from visiting.⁶

While the spatial location of Thiên Phúc Pagoda constitutes an important factor, language is yet another crucial mediating dimension influencing the process of embedding the pagoda and its activity into the Polish context. Starting with Google search results and its official Facebook profile, through inscriptions on its gate, to prayer books and posters, notice boards and captions below pictures inside, Vietnamese language almost entirely remains the only language in which information regarding the pagoda is available. It is also almost the only means of everyday communication and of religious activities; except times when Vietnamese children attending the pagoda speak to one another in Polish. The overwhelming majority of Vietnamese ethnics active at the pagoda and present during ceremonies and festivals explains this language ubiquity. All management board members of the Society (BSVP), pagoda residents, and attendees of religious prayers and worship are Vietnamese native speakers and while there are only a few exceptions of fluent speakers of Polish, others speak some Polish or only Vietnamese.

The evident lack of regular intensive ethnic interplay inside and outside the pagoda emerging from locational and linguistic barriers might imply an ethnic-based strategy with a focus solely on Vietnamese community members. This complies with McLellan's conclusions (1999) drawn from her detailed ethnographic study of five Buddhist communities in Toronto who – with some exceptions – tended to keep to themselves. However,

in this pagoda setting an assumption that its caretakers refrain from entering any constant negotiations with the Polish social context is profoundly inadequate. Since the establishment of the BSVP in 2013 and concurrent creation of the pagoda, the board members seem to have adopted a policy of opening up to the non-Vietnamese public despite significant difficulties in this process.

First, the openness is frequently manifested in a general warm-hearted welcoming attitude towards visitors. We witnessed great hospitality directed to all visitors, ranging from Indian Buddhists and Poles interested in Buddhism to teenagers on a school trip, and finally to neighbours attracted by festivals organised within the pagoda walls. Their hospitality, unusual for other places of worship in Poland, includes serving refreshments and sweets or sometimes even vegetarian meals for the guests.

Second, this practice and a friendly attitude of neighbours towards the pagoda representatives contributed to embedding the pagoda in the local surrounding. Despite their lack of a thorough host society culture and language command, they first managed to rent land for a parking lot. As a result of subsequent land purchase from their neighbours with an aim to build a proper pagoda, they became landowners instead of just tenants.

Third, the BSVP board members undertook diverse initiatives in addressing selected actors of their Polish audience. In October 2013 – a couple of months after the pagoda began operating – we participated in a meeting organised on the site to which representatives of Lesznowola communal authorities and Polish academia were invited. The event was held to celebrate the visit of the Venerable Thích Minh Trí who was officially appointed as the pagoda abbot in 2015. The abbot, holding a doctorate degree in history from the National University in Hanoi, was to give lectures on Buddhism at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in 2014. However, the plans were never put into effect. While the pagoda actions directed towards local and intellectual elites did not result in establishment of any permanent relations with Polish institutions or actors, they formed an important part of the process of negotiating belonging in another social context, namely the Vietnamese community in Poland.

Further initiatives directed towards a broader audience were undertaken as reactions to migrant inclusion programmes and included a workshop on Buddhist religion and Vietnamese culture organised in Raszyn municipal library in 2015. However, such activities were not continued, which can at least partly be attributed to the change in the situation of Polish NGO-s dealing with cultural diversity issues. Under the right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) government, funding for such organisations was significantly cut down, which resulted in the discontinuation of many actions aiming at integration of migrants (Klaus 2018). The pagoda representatives, however, remained responsive to initiatives undertaken by the Polish side, which resulted in hosting a school trip facilitated by us, researchers. The trip that took place in 2019 and sparked interest to such an extent that four more trips were planned for 2020. However, these were all cancelled following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the one trip that took place, pagoda representatives consistently attempted to transmit knowledge regarding the rudiments of Buddhism and its worship practices. Thus, while the situation illustrates the weakness of links between the pagoda and Polish society, it also indicates openness and willingness to participate in Polish initiatives enhancing multicultural environment and a strategy of openness adopted by the BSVP board who perceive a Vietnamese-speaking researcher as a potentially valuable link.

The school trip revealed another important dimension of the pagoda representatives' strategy aimed at strengthening their resonance among not only the Polish public, but also among a particular segment of the Vietnamese community in Poland: the youth. Most Polish school children visited the pagoda or talked to a Buddhist for the first time, and most of them perceived pagoda practices through the lens of exotic Vietnamese religiosity. However, for the pagoda representatives attracting young Poles is related to the great challenge of winning over younger generations of the Vietnamese in Poland. Until the pandemic outbreak, regular celebrations that take place twice a lunar month – at full moon and new moon – would include up to 50 adults gathered on the pagoda first floor to chant sutras in two consecutive evenings. However, teenagers would stay at home or remain downstairs waiting for their parents to finish. So far, none of the Vietnamese sangha members arriving at the pagoda several times a year have made attempts to conduct Buddhist workshops for the youth who acquired more Polish than Vietnamese cultural values and in most cases are more fluent in Polish than Vietnamese language. In mostly ethnically, racially and religiously homogeneous Poland, they learn the Catholic religion or general ethics at school; however, Buddhism is taught nowhere. The question of what needs to be done to gain their recognition remains unanswered. The Polish converts, who might as well serve as an incentive to appeal to younger generations, currently consist of a small cohort of usually no more than a few individuals attending ceremonies or festivals. As we witnessed, virtually none of them became a regular member of the pagoda community.

Despite fruitless attempts to attract attention of the host society's broader audience, Thiên Phúc Pagoda continued to engage in creating and sustaining connections with Polish social surroundings in the sphere of religion through long-lasting cooperation with the Polish-operated Buddhist centre in Grabnik. The cooperation between Benchen Karma Kamtsang Buddhist Association Poland (the Benchen Association) began in 2006, when one of the high-ranked representatives of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, Sangje Njenpa Rinpoche, visited Thiên Việt Pagoda near the Decennial Anniversary Stadium. Since then, mutual visits between the Benchen Association and the BSVP have regularly taken place, with Polish monks concelebrating religious ceremonies in two Vietnamese-operated pagodas – Thiên Phúc and Nhân Hòa. According to Lama Rinchen, leader of the Benchen Association, delegations of a few up to 30–40 Vietnamese Buddhists regularly participate in ceremonies organised in Grabnik. Therefore, the social context defined by common religious affiliation has been the only one in which negotiating belonging resulted in relatively stable embeddedness of Thiên Phúc Pagoda in the Polish society.

In the following sections, we trace the ways in which Thiên Phúc Pagoda have actively negotiated their belonging in the social context of the Vietnamese community in Poland and in broader Polish society, aiming to achieve one of their crucial goals: to become a recognisable Buddhist institution that transgresses ethnic boundaries.

Bridging the Gap: Buddhist Institutions in the Vietnamese Community

According to the traditional approach in migration studies, migrant religious institutions are perceived as organisations that provide psychological and spiritual support for their attendants, but are also important for their role in maintaining and performing cultural

identity (McLelland 1999). Therefore, churches, temples and pagodas become places where belonging to communities defined by national and ethnic identification is negotiated (Cadge and Ecklund 2007). The contexts in which the legitimacy was negotiated included interpersonal relationships among Vietnamese community members, Vietnamese religious organisations, and institutions of Vietnamese state which directly influences the diasporic migrant institutions (Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2017).

The process of negotiating belonging dates back to 2007 when the first Vietnamese pagoda in Poland, *Thiện Việt Pagoda*, was still in operation. It was managed by the Association of Vietnamese Admirers of Buddhism (AVAB), an institution belonging to an umbrella organisation called the Association of the Vietnamese in Poland (AVP) which seems to approve and control minor community groups.⁷ The Vietnamese migrant communities in Eastern European countries – with their genesis in ‘socialist fraternity’ exchange programmes – maintain multiple links to institutions of the Vietnamese state which enforces its diaspora politics through state-licensed migrant organisations – the AVP, in the case of Poland (Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2017). This puts the Polish-Vietnamese community in sharp contrast with Vietnamese communities in the United States and other Western countries formed by the South Vietnamese refugees who fled the country in face of persecutions after the victory of communist North Vietnam in 1975. In consequence, two different patterns of erecting pagodas emerged. In Western Vietnamese diasporas representatives of Buddhist clergy – refugees – commonly took such initiatives. In the case of the Polish-Vietnamese such undertakings required lay invitation of Buddhist clergy affiliated with the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha in Hanoi (VBS, *Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, the official Buddhist institution of the Vietnamese state), organisation granting legitimisation by the Vietnamese state.

As *Thiện Việt pagoda* was located on a rented piece of land, the Venerable Thích Minh Trí, head of the International Buddhist Committee of the VBS in Hanoi and the monk invited to the pagoda at the beginning of its existence, donated his own money to buy land for a new pagoda. However, despite the written approval of the VBS to appoint him the abbot none of its recipients in Poland announced the decision. The conflict and imminent schism came as a result of the construction of a new pagoda, *Thiên Phúc*, initiated by the former owner of *Thăng Long* cultural centre in 2010 as soon as the closedown of the Decennial Stadium was announced. Allegations of ‘undermining the community unity’ together with other allegations were voiced on the *Quê Việt* portal managed by the AVP (Hà Minh Hiến 2012). Arguments were raised against the act as a private investment instead of being a fully ‘communal enterprise’ under the auspices of the AVP. The ‘alleged usurper’ was a small group of Buddhists following the Venerable Thích Minh Trí. In 2013, the group formalised their activity as an officially registered Polish organisation, the Buddhist Society of the Vietnamese in Poland (BSVP). Consequently, the Venerable was officially appointed abbot of *Thiên Phúc Pagoda*. Meanwhile, the AVAB initiated the construction of another pagoda, *Nhân Hòa*. While it received the patronage of the AVP and the embassy and had a monk as a resident, the monk chosen for the abbot has not been approved by the VBS. The advantage of *Thiên Phúc Pagoda* over the other one meant having the abbot officially acknowledged by the VBS, maintaining financial transparency and providing space for UNESCO acknowledged *hầu đồng* rituals in *Thăng Long* shrine. And yet, the absence of ordained

clergy might be one of the reasons why Nhân Hoà Pagoda – a ‘community pagoda’ – managed to attract more adherents.

Within the scope of our research, relations between Thiên Phúc Pagoda caretakers and Vietnamese migrant associations – including Nhân Hoà Pagoda – have evolved. At the onset of the crisis, the BSVP board made efforts to embed the pagoda in the social milieu of Polish local authorities and academia, as described in the previous section. This strategy, exemplifying the intersectional nature of the process of search for belonging (Yuval-Davis 2016; Christensen 2009), demonstrates their efforts to diversify the range of negotiating partners, and might be perceived as a way to relieve the burden of potential exclusion imposed by the AVP, and at the same time to build on the prestigious impact of Polish institutions.

Nevertheless, based on the magnitude of intricate interrelations within the community, the newly initiated group made efforts to make their presence recognisable in Vietnamese official circles through active involvement in manifold events organised by the AVP. For example, they participated in ceremonial rituals of gift and flower-giving during formal community celebrations and engaged in a culinary contest during International Women’s Day in March 2015. Their success in negotiating their own space on the Vietnamese institutional scene was also made possible due to several other factors. These were calls of visiting ordained clergy for peace and harmony within the community, efforts of both sides to finish the conflict and willingness of the AVAB and the AVP leaders to accept the other pagoda as long as the pagoda under their patronage – Nhân Hoà – was treated as the sole legitimate heir of the first Vietnamese pagoda in Poland.

In response to Thiên Phúc Pagoda’s efforts to gain recognition, the AVP have started to include the pagoda representatives in the social world of the Vietnamese community but tended to preserve the hierarchy in which Nhân Hoà Pagoda would occupy a higher position. For instance, while the monk representing Nhân Hoà Pagoda is regularly invited as an honorary guest to events organised by the AVP and seated at one of the VIP tables together with other leaders of Vietnamese associations, no Thiên Phúc Pagoda representative is granted such an honour. The status of both the pagodas was clearly manifested in July 2019 during the 20th anniversary of the AVPA when an audio-visual presentation listed all the achievements of the Association but the existence of Thiên Phúc Pagoda. The pagoda’s activity was part of the official community history in the anniversary brochure, albeit only on one of its back pages. However, they were included among those awarded by AVP representatives and received two certificates for ‘active support in community affairs’: one as an institution, the other for the president of the BSVP. The apparent exclusion from the 20 years of community history presentation might have seemed an act of punishment from a more powerful actor towards a small group of willful players. However, the awards and acknowledgement of the pagoda activities in the brochure seemed to offer official approval for another Buddhist institution, constituting an inclusion strategy of the AVP.

This particular pattern of support and recognition was demonstrated in December 2019, when Thiên Phúc Pagoda, among other religiously-based groups, namely Vietnamese Catholic and Protestant communities, received a 5000 PLN donation from the AVP. This inclusion of the pagoda among the two small-sized Vietnamese religious

communities in Poland seems to have grounded its legitimacy as a distinct religious community calling for financial support from the big lay Vietnamese organisation. And yet, beside the institutional contribution of the major influential non-religious association, within the last two years, we witnessed mutual participation in workshops or prayers organised by the two pagodas. For example, whilst Thiên Phúc Pagoda Buddhists took part in a meditation workshop organised in the other one in May 2019, some Buddhists from Nhân Hòa took part in Mahayana prayers organised exclusively in the smaller pagoda in summer the same year. Currently, Vietnamese Buddhists evade discussions on the schism focusing on the policy of religious plurality within the community: ‘Wherever there is Buddha, there is a pagoda’.

Vietnamese migrant institutions seem to be of crucial importance within the various contexts to which Thiên Phúc Pagoda negotiates belonging. These dominant Vietnamese institutions exert further significant influence as many are managed by wealthy Vietnamese entrepreneurs able to mobilise their financial assets. By winning their support, this small-sized pagoda might fulfil the goal of developing as a Buddhist centre to serve spiritual purposes through worship and ritual, and more worldly engagement in charity events.

Negotiating Spiritual Outreach: Worship and Charitable Actions

Acquiring new adherents is one of the most important Thiên Phúc Pagoda goals, although never openly verbalised by the representatives. The pagoda caretakers attempt to gain recognition of prospective converts from both inside and outside the community. They do this by various means, from inviting others directly to participate in religious practices organised at the pagoda to undertaking worldly initiatives such as acts of charity.

Our fieldwork observations revealed manifold attempts the pagoda representatives take to propagate knowledge about Buddhism; for example, during school trips or workshops for the elderly. However, despite visits from some Poles interested in Buddhism, none joined the pagoda community on a more permanent basis. This trend is consistent with conclusions drawn in other countries with a significant presence of Buddhist immigrants, such as the United States and Canada (McLellan 1999; Matthews 2006; Glein 2019). Buddhist pagodas established by ethnic communities usually operate independently from centres where Buddhist converts of Western origin attend, whereas pagodas transgressing ethnic boundaries tend to be rare exceptions. Authors such as Glein (2019) indicate that the division among Buddhists in the West arises not only from linguistic obstacles hindering cooperation between the immigrant and convert sanghas but also from differences in dominant models of religious practice. While ritual and devotional merit-making (offerings that bring prosperity), supposedly prevail among Buddhists of Asian origin, meditation aimed at achieving enlightenment is a major form of Buddhist practice among Western converts (Glein 2019). McLellan (1999) signals that even if Westerners do convert alongside migrant Buddhists, they tend to switch to non-Asian communities because of different interpretations of Buddhist philosophy. They might also do so because of strenuous effort to adjust cognitively and socially to a new milieu in which social and religious identities are interrelated (McLellan 1999).

In the Polish case, converts to Buddhism whose overall number oscillates around 15,000 (GSO 2018) are grouped in 19 registered schools dispersed among various Buddhist traditions. The most numerous schools belong to the Tibetan Buddhism tradition;⁸ others, far less numerous, adhere to Zen Buddhism. Regardless of their particular affiliation, all major schools of Buddhism in Poland emphasise meditation as a primary form of spiritual practice (Krajewska 2013). However, Thiên Phúc Pagoda – affiliated both with Pure Land and Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhism – focuses only on collective rituals such as devotional merit-making and prayers. According to the pagoda lay leaders, the absence of a permanently resident monastic who can implement group meditation stands is the reason for the lack of offer that is attractive for Poles. Nevertheless, some individuals do perform their own meditative routine on the site; for example, the BSVP president. While the pagoda adherents maintain cooperation with the Benchen Association in Grabnik, their participation in rituals celebrated in Polish Buddhist centres is very limited not only due to language barriers but also differences in the dominant model of spiritual practice. While the large statue of Buddha located in Grabnik is attended by Vietnamese Buddhists with great reference as a testimony of ‘authenticity’ of the Polish-operated pagoda, the issues central to Benchen sangha such as listening to the Lama’s teachings and participation in meditations are not the main focus for Thiên Phúc Pagoda adherents.

As with many religious institutions in other countries (McLellan 1999), Thiên Phúc Pagoda caters for both religious and cultural needs of the community. While it provides a space for maintaining the Vietnamese identity during everyday worship practices, festivals play a particularly important role as ‘places where cultural identity could be performed and revised’ (Buff 2001: 13). Major festive celebrations include Buddhist Vesak (Birthday of Buddha) or Vu Lan (the Hungry Souls Festival). For many Vietnamese Buddhists, the latter refers mainly to filial piety (báo hiếu). The ceremony is held on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month (in either August or September) during which the premises are crowded with people. This is one of the days when those who hardly ever visit the pagoda for worship and prayers come with their families, children and in some cases, even Polish spouses.

Apart from Vu Lan, other Vietnamese culture festivals are held, such as Lunar New Year Holiday, Mid-Autumn Festival and the Hùng Kings Death Anniversary. Organising Vietnamese traditional holiday celebrations that are loosely related to Buddhism but are part of Vietnamese culture is an important asset in negotiating belonging within the Vietnamese community in Poland. Festivals held annually on this small-size pagoda premises tend to attract large attendance almost exclusively represented by Vietnamese community members. Polish adults do not appear to mingle at these celebrations conducted mostly in Vietnamese and portraying a religion and culture foreign to their own roots and customs. Thus, such events might only constitute exotic occasions to be seen once or twice without sparking any involvement in the pagoda development.

While the spiritual and festive practices have not met with a significant response in Polish society, worldly initiatives undertaken by the pagoda leaders have achieved greater resonance. Besides activities undertaken by Thiên Phúc Pagoda to negotiate its space in the Polish and Vietnamese social context, charity initiatives offer another important pillar of their strategy. They constitute a significant part of negotiating belonging as they are directed towards and conducted in cooperation with diverse audiences.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic saw Thiên Phúc Pagoda's involvement in relief actions in Poland. From March to May 2020, they helped 55 Vietnamese families by providing them with monthly supplies of food and equipped seven families with computers and printers to support distance learning. With the situation in Polish hospitals quickly deteriorating during the first lockdown and medical staff desperately asking the Polish public for help in supplying basic protective utilities and garments, the pagoda raised enough money and resources to sew 15,000 cotton two-layer face masks and to purchase 15,000 latex gloves and 150 litres of alcohol hand disinfectant. These were distributed mostly to 13 hospitals in Warsaw and other areas in Poland and to administrative institutions of Wólka Kosowska municipality and Ochota borough – densely populated with the Vietnamese – in Warsaw. These donations coincided with other charitable actions performed by many Vietnamese community members during the lockdown under the common slogan of #VNJestesmyZWami (#VNWeAreWithYou).

Nonetheless, the COVID-related relief aid is not a one-time event, but continuation of a policy aimed to define the pagoda as a charitable institution. Tết Không Đồng is yet another unique initiative performed on behalf of Thiên Phúc Pagoda. It was first organised in February 2019 in a working space of many less affluent community members of ASG trading centre in Wólka Kosowska with two aims: to help instil Vietnamese culture among the second and third-generation offspring and to provide relief to those who cannot afford extra food and ingredients for the Lunar New Year Celebration. In January 2020, the event was organised in the same venue and modified to include information in Polish on Vietnamese culture. Unlike the preceding year, a banner advertising both the event and the pagoda was presented in Vietnamese and Polish, however, as previously food supplies were provided together with Lunar New Year calendars and decorations given free of charge. Unfortunately, participation of Polish and Russian speaking people was mainly limited to food consumption; few wanted to learn about the goal and cultural aspects of the event. While these two events may not have completely achieved the goal of providing for the impoverished, they made a definite contribution to broadening the visibility of the pagoda within the Vietnamese community and especially among those working in Wólka Kosowska as an institution supporting the poor and aiding cultural enhancement among Poles and the second and third generation of Vietnamese people in Poland.

Thus far, the pagoda's COVID-19 pandemic charitable actions have been their only activity to have received media coverage in the Internet versions of major press titles such as *Newsweek Polska* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, as well as local public television (TVP3 2020; Wojtczuk 2020; Kim 2020), with *Gazeta Wyborcza* and TVP3 mentioning the BSVP explicitly as one of the Vietnamese organisations actively providing help for hospital medical staff. Thus, similar to Chen's conclusions (2002) drawn from her study of two types of Taiwanese religious institutions in the United States – pagodas and Evangelical Christian churches – charity events undertaken by Thiên Phúc Pagoda might prove central in the process of negotiating belonging in the Polish and Vietnamese social context. As Chen (2002) noted, charity actions are an easy culturally transferable form of activity that provide a convenient platform for public engagement in the broader society enabling to overcome linguistic or sociocultural barriers.

Conclusion

Thiên Phúc Pagoda engages into a complex process of negotiating belonging within the multiple social contexts in which it operates to fulfil its goal of becoming a vibrant Buddhist centre. The struggle for legitimacy within the Poland-based Vietnamese community is vital for accessing resources such as financial support and the ability to mobilise prospective adherents. Initiatives aimed at inviting Polish people to visit the pagoda, while rather ineffective in terms of acquiring new believers, provide proof of willingness of the pagoda to transgress ethnic boundaries. At the same time, its managing group has to negotiate belonging within the institutional world of Vietnamese organisations consisting of multiple actors, such as the AVP, other migrant initiatives and concurring religious institutions – most importantly the fellow Buddhist Nhân Hòa pagoda. The strategy of pagoda representatives includes meeting the needs of both the Polish and Vietnamese communities while instilling Vietnamese culture and traditions in younger generations. However, currently, the relationship with the Benchen Association in Grabnik is the only instance of relatively permanent rootedness of Thiên Phúc Pagoda in the Polish social context, which might result from the fact that it is based on values central to both institutions. Being niche institutions operating on the margins of the Polish society, the Benchen Association might provide a unique space for intercultural contact – albeit of a very limited range.

From an integration paradigm perspective, Thiên Phúc Pagoda seems to be an institution lacking many major indicators of integration. Its attendants are almost exclusively Vietnamese and lack language competence of their host country, which constitutes a serious obstacle for the pagoda to operate across ethnic boundaries. Therefore, in respect to dominant arguments within Polish public discourse regarding the Vietnamese community, the way the pagoda functions seems to strengthen the image of the Vietnamese as a self-isolating community. And yet, success in regrounding their sacred space in a peripheral profane area by accumulation of territorial and human resources for future development and their responsiveness to migrant inclusion initiatives proves that their isolation to some extent results from the host country national and local policy affecting cultural diversity.

The manifold process of negotiating belonging, including worldly actions such as engagement in charity initiatives, contributes, however, to rooting the pagoda in various social contexts such as the local and Polish Buddhist communities. It remains to be seen whether the strategy of engagement in charity actions will affect reimagining the Vietnamese community as an active contributor to the Polish public sphere, which would constitute proof of a positive role that the pagoda plays in respect to integration. Conversely, it is yet to be revealed how the engagement of a Buddhist religious institution operating within a predominantly Roman Catholic society will be perceived from the point of view of an alternative argument present in the Polish discourse on the Vietnamese – the ‘invisibility bargain’ model – in which the migrants obtain acceptance in exchange for refraining from actively participating in social and political life of the host society.

Notes

1. A more recent census will be held in 2021.

2. Recent reports suggest that Indian community might be the second (OFF 2021) or even first (GSO 2020) largest Asian migrant group in Poland.
3. An example of a press headline: The Vietnamese in Warsaw: What Do We Know about the Most Mysterious Community in the Capital [of Poland]? (MJ 2015).
4. An example taken from Szczerbowska's article (2015): 'They do not complain and they avoid conflicts. They do not flaunt their views and religion'. Comments under the article of Karpieszuk (2015).
5. Internet memes picturing the Vietnamese as an unproblematic community in contrast with Muslim refugees were popular especially during the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe. See: https://img4.demotywatoryfb.pl/uploads/201612/1482274316_8bzhtc_600.jpg. A commenter to the picture stated approvingly that the Vietnamese (contrary to the Muslim community who in that time initiated the construction of a mosque in Warsaw) 'do not demand to build their pagoda in Poland'.
6. For information on Nhân Hòa Pagoda see: Szymańska-Matusiewicz and Bossak-Herbst (2019).
7. The AVAB is one of 38 associations operating under the main umbrella organization called the Association of the Vietnamese in Poland (AVP).
8. According to the Polish General Statistics Office (GSO) data, the Diamond Way Buddhism Karma Kagyu Lineage Association is the most numerous association with 8284 members as of 2015; second largest being the Benchen Association with 2038 members as of 2011 (GSO 2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 769478. The project en/counter/points is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme (www.heranet.info) which is co-funded by AHRC, MIUR, NCN, NWO, BMBF, and the European Commission through Horizon 2020. The research has also been funded by National Science Centre, Poland [project 2017/27/N/HS6/02161]

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