In the ‘acknowledgements’ section of this book, Phan Le Ha states that ‘[w]riting is my identity. Writing this book has shaped my identity as much as my identity has shaped what and how I have written’ (p. xi). By foregrounding the impact of the book on its own writer, the reader of Teaching English as an International Language can perhaps expect, at a minimum, an unusually intimate literary journey through both familiar and foreign territory. The book certainly delivers that, but it also provokes thinking about teaching EIL and teacher identity from a multitude of perspectives. As essentially a case study of Vietnamese teachers of English and their identity formation, the book’s focus is a welcome addition to the literature in applying (and locating) theory to a specific cultural context in the globalised market of English language teaching and learning.

Phan’s book sets out to treat identity as ‘the main concern’ (p. 12) in studies of English language teachers in international and mobile contexts, claiming that such studies have tended to overlook the relevance and usefulness of theories of mobility and transnationality to explicate teacher identity formation. The book comprises seven chapters, moving from theory towards case study evidence. Chapter 1 introduces the book’s contents and its recurring metaphor of English teacher in Vietnam as ‘daughter-in-law of a hundred families’. The notion of morality as being central to the identity of Vietnamese teachers of English is firmly established, as is the author’s position as English learner, teacher and ‘insider’ researcher.

Chapter 2 provides a broad review of the relevant literature, both Western and Vietnamese, vis-à-vis foundational issues for the book’s study of a small group of Vietnamese teachers of English who are undertaking postgraduate courses in TESOL in various English-speaking countries. Chapter 3 examines the ‘politics’ of EIL and ELT. The first half of the chapter continues a review of the literature, namely that related to the ‘ownership’ of English and issues of ‘Centre’ Englishes versus ‘Other’ and ‘Peripheral’ Englishes. The second half of the chapter marks a shift from literature review to critique, as the author takes aim at TESOL programs in English-speaking countries.

Chapter 4 considers two dichotomies in identity formation particularly relevant to the Vietnamese teachers: (1) professional / personal; and (2) Vietnamese teacher / teacher of English. Chapter 5, similarly, uses dichotomies to frame how roles and selves are
mediated, shaped and reshaped’ (p. 131) by reference (again) to Vietnamese teacher / teacher of English; native / non-native teacher of English; and Western-trained / non-Western trained teacher of English.

Chapter 6 provides a case study of how the identity of one Vietnamese teacher of English is formed differently through different data collection methods. Chapter 7 concludes the book by summarising its main messages and consolidating theory with case study data.

This book is unusual in several ways. First, it is written in a somewhat unorthodox style: the author provides an ‘autoethnographical’ account of the book’s writing; she foregrounds a poem she has authored to capture the subtleties as well as the identity dilemmas of Vietnamese teachers of English; she provides a scholarly review of the literature; she takes on the voice of critic in certain passages; and, she includes a book review in one chapter. Given that the author has forewarned that her identity ‘is writing’, one is inclined to accept this style for what it contributes to making the case rather than to fault it for its lack of conformity to conventions in a scholarly work.

The book is also unusual in that it provides one of the few available studies that ground the discussions surrounding EIL and non-native speaker teachers in a specific context (i.e. Vietnam). In this sense, it contributes to the call by Moussu and Llurda (2008) for studies of this nature, that do more than contribute to the generic literature on English teaching by non-native speakers of English. (Ironically, Phan does not refer to the NS/NNS literature (e.g. the works of Peter Medgyes or George Braine) in discussing native and non-native speaker issues (pp. 135–143) but the findings her data show are actually consistent with the literature in this area (i.e. that both native and non-native speakers have valid contributions to make as language teachers, and neither is superior to the other).

Last, but not least, the book is unusual in its title. In this regard, the prospective reader might be slightly misled. Based on its actual contents, the book might perhaps more accurately have been titled “Identity, Resistance and Negotiation: a study of Vietnamese teachers of English as an international language”.

Early in the book, Phan states that she is not attempting to reconcile Western and Vietnamese approaches and views about language, culture and identity (p. 26), but rather to expose and clarify them, and suggests that to fully understand what makes Vietnamese teachers of English tick, one has to acknowledge the validity of both Western and Vietnamese views. She argues that while the West approaches identity as either ‘essentialist’ or ‘socially constructed’ (especially the latter), Vietnamese scholars make the case for a ‘core’ Vietnamese identity which includes a spiritual dimension (p. 29). (Unhelpfully, the
spiritual is never fully explained or evidenced). Central to the identity of Vietnamese teachers of English, therefore, is the sense of a person who guides the morality of his or her students; and the strong sense of ‘belonging’ that attaches to the role of being a teacher in Vietnamese society.

While packed with interesting information, I found the first half of the book to be increasingly heavy going. Much of the literature reviewed is presented but not interpreted; the reader is left to sort out the relative weight of various arguments and the significance of individual scholarly contributions. Similarly, a tag paragraph at the end of a section to claim its relevance to the book becomes somewhat frustrating in lieu of a clearer, more coherent argument. The lack of an index makes remedying misunderstandings all the more difficult as well.

The second half of the book becomes much more engaging as the voices of the Vietnamese teachers of English are finally heard. As their stories, views and experiences are presented, the theoretical territory traversed in the first half of the book becomes more relevant. Reed’s (2001) theory of ‘fastening’, ‘unfastening’, and ‘refastening’ in identity formation is particularly prominent in the analyses of Phan’s data. Teachers are seen to be fastening their identities to particular spaces and times, and then unfastening them as circumstances alter, and then refastening them again as they talk of and justify their beliefs. This theory sits well with the notion that Vietnamese teachers have a common core identity but ever changing additional identities.

As someone who taught English in Vietnam in the early 1990s and then taught teacher education courses there in the early 2000s, the accounts of the experiences and views of Vietnamese teachers of English ring true to me. As an academic who currently teaches in a postgraduate applied linguistics program at an Australian university, the views of the Vietnamese teachers regarding the quality of their Australian educational experiences are particularly interesting. One issue that merits rethinking, however, is the complaint voiced that Australian lecturers do not teach using a communicative approach. This misses the point: CLT is meant for language teaching, not content teaching. This confusion is not uncommon (see, for example, Moore, 2006), but is unhelpful when viewing teachers as role models.

Another perturbing issue for me involved the case study of the Vietnamese English teacher Kien. In this study I perceived a difference of understanding concerning the notion of identity ‘formation’ and agency. The factors that Kien attends to in the various data collection methods of Phan’s research (e.g. individual interview; group discussion) are seen to actually form different identities of him, rather than to be representing his identity.
in different ways. Perhaps other readers will understand this point without difficulty or confusion.

The book begins and ends with a poem authored by Phan, but drawn from the words and experiences of the Vietnamese teachers of English who participated in her study. After reading the book and then re-reading the poem, I had a better sense of its subtlety and underlying ‘truth’. This awareness marked a clear shift in my own appreciation of the burdens of the ‘daughter-in-law of a hundred families’. Although set in the Vietnamese context, no doubt this metaphor will resonate with many other EIL contexts. In this way, Phan’s book makes a very useful contribution to the literature of teacher identity in TESOL.

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REFERENCES