THE "GREEN ROADS OF HERDING CATS:" HOW VIETNAMESE CANNABIS CULTIVATORS HAVE BUILT UP THEIR SYNDICATES IN AUSTRALIA

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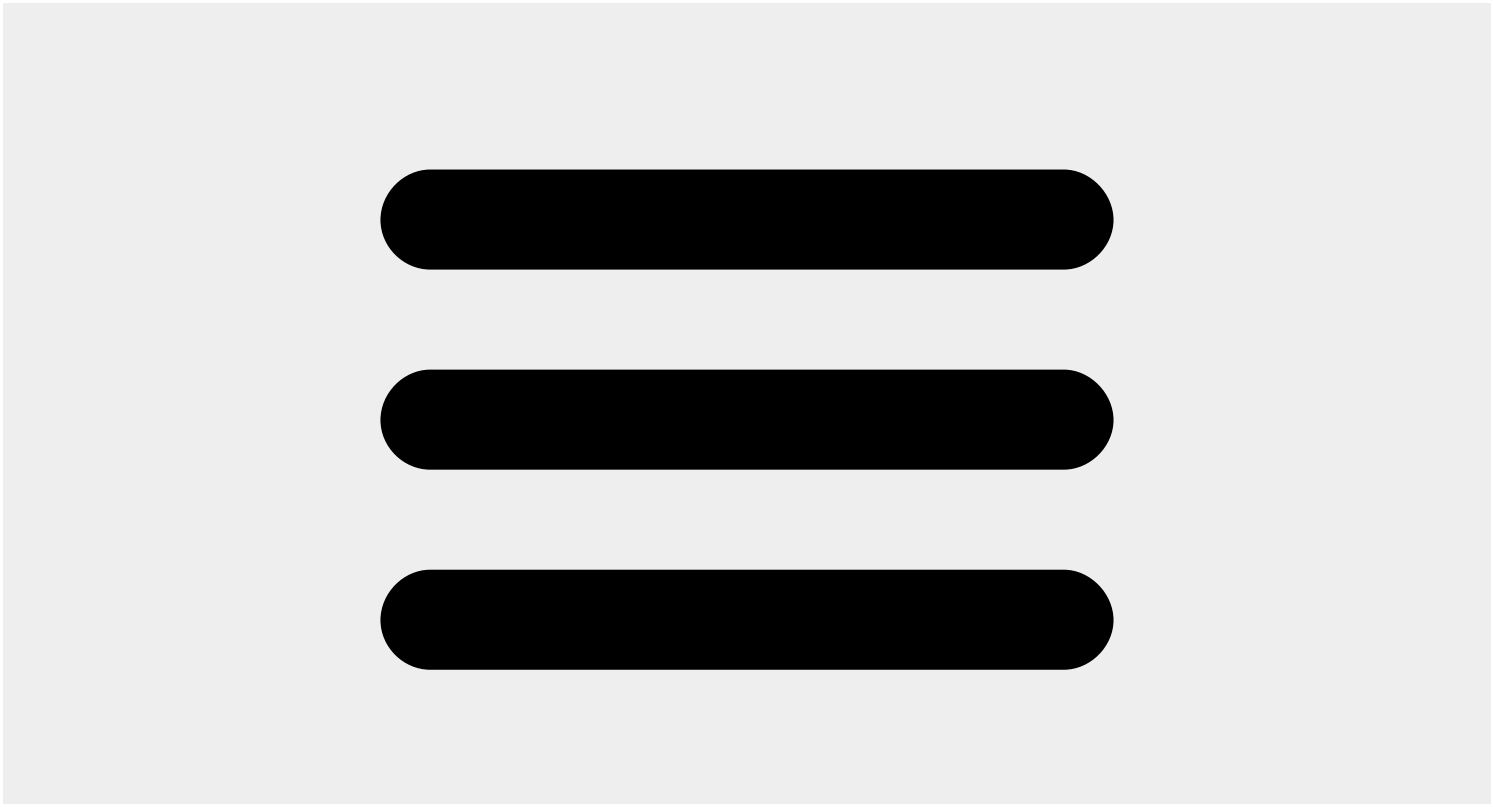


Vietnam has become a regional hub for Southeast Asia drug markets for many decades and more so in recent years (Luong, 2014, 2017, 2020b). Many scholars have confirmed the appearance and involvement of ethnic Vietnamese communities overseas, either directly or indirectly, into cultivating and manufacturing cannabis (Luong, 2017; Nožina & Kraus, 2020; Schoenmakers et al., 2012; Silverstone & Savage, 2010). According to the official authorities of Vietnam, Vietnamese diaspora communities have accounted for around four and a half million citizens living, working, or studying across 110 nations in six different regions. The 2016 Census recorded the Vietnamese population in Australia ranked as the sixth-largest globally with a population of 219,351, equivalent to 3.6 percent of Australia's overseas-born population

and around 1 percent of Australia's total population (Simon-Davies, 2018). However, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020), unveiled as of 30 June 2020, has revealed that Vietnamese-born prisoners were recorded as being at the top three highest rates among offenders committing the most serious offenses/charges (789 prisoners) within Australia. This rate was only lower than Australians (33,240) and New Zealanders (1,048), and higher than the persons from the United Kingdom (602) and China (297). The Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ANZSOC) currently separates criminal codes into 16 divisions numbered 01 to 16. Noticeably, among the 16 most severe crimes of non-Australian-born prisoners, Vietnamese-born prisoners accounted for the highest-ranking population for criminal drug offenses. And the rate of related cannabis growing operations has also steadily increased.

Crime and Ethnicity

Around two decades ago, when international scholars argued and exchanged the nature of the organizational structure of organized crime, which was coined in the 1920s by Frederic Thrasher in his investigation '*The Gang and Organized Crime'* (Thrasher, 1927: 409-451), they stated that "the problem of delineating organized crime is neither a clearly discernible empirical phenomenon, nor do we find an agreement on what its 'essence' or 'nature' might be" (von Lampe, 2002, p. 191). A century later, identifying the structure and individual roles in criminal groups continues as the primary theme in studies on organized crime (von Lampe, 2012, p. 182). Regarding organized crime structure in drug trafficking, meanwhile, the majority of scholars assess the relationship between ethnicity and organized crime as an inextricably linked. However, few, if any, identify and evaluate the role of a specific race in illicit drug networks (Bovenkerk et al., 2003; Soudijn & Kleemans, 2009). Some researchers have doubted that when the quantity of multi-ethnic partnerships in drug trading increases, it means that ethnicity and mono-ethnic networks decrease (Pearson & Hobbs, 2001; Ruggiero & Khan, 2006). On the contrary, other scholars have pointed out that depending on organizational structures and traditional cultural characteristics, it is likely to create distinct points relating to the minor ethnicity's role in drug trafficking entities (Maher & Dixon, 1999). Also, ethnic minority involvement may reflect social exclusion, and it is even a functional tool to assist researchers in perceiving and evaluating the nature of drug trading (Luong, 2014). Moreover, they can create small, medium, and even large scale networks by working through their family ties and the association with fellow-countrymen, who often come from similar villages and communes among provinces and districts. Luong (2014, 2017, 2020a) tested and clarified both family ties and fellow-countrymen as the most prioritized forms of those Vietnamese drug trafficking networks to recruit and operate on the regional and national scale.

Almost all these studies have analyzed and examined the non-Vietnamese syndicates in Europe, Canada, the UK, and the US. There is still an overall lack of independent, scholarly research conducted on Vietnamese organized crime organizational structure and related modus operandi in cannabis cultivation, including Australia. Since the first reports from the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the National Crime Authority (1995), little progress has been made. Yet, similar research has been conducted in Canada, the Netherland, the Czech Republic, and the UK in recent years (Morselli et al., 2011; Nožina & Kraus, 2020; Schoenmakers et al., 2012; Silverstone, 2011). This current project will build on existing knowledge to utilize a broad range of typologies developed from transnational organized crime and drug

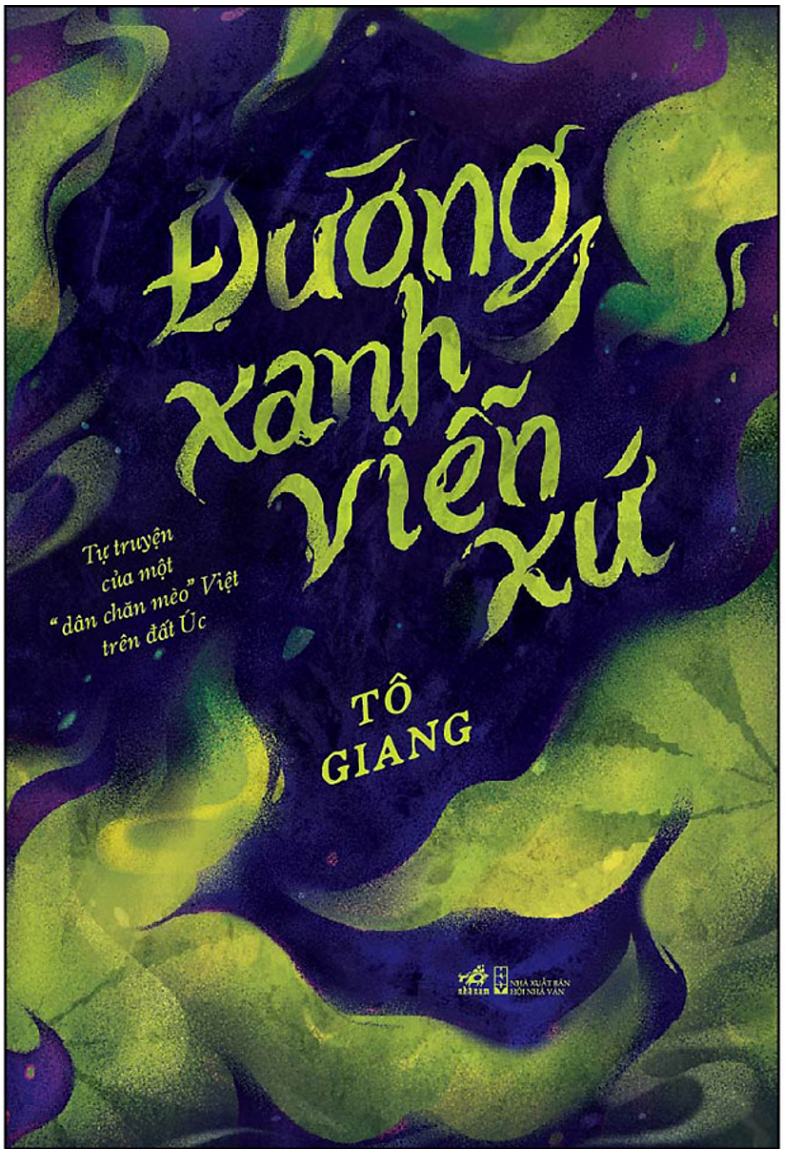
trafficking research and apply them to an extensive dataset of court/tribunal cases relating to Vietnamese cannabis cultivation in Australia. The findings will test the nature and structure of co-offending in criminal drug offenses in Australia, one of the top five co-offending networks among 16 Australia and New Zealand Society of Criminology (ANZSOC) criminal classifications.

Vietnamese Cannabis Syndicates in Australia

As the first official report of the government, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the National Crime Authority (1995) has warned of concerns relating to criminal gangs within the Vietnamese community that 'are increasingly heavily armed, are moving into drugs and gambling, establishing links with Australian crime figures, and becoming involved in standover rackets in their own community since the end of the 1980s. Meanwhile, the Australian law enforcement agencies (LEAs) focused on Chinese criminal gangs as one of the most dangerous influences among Asian organised crimes; seemingly, they have disregarded Vietnamese drug trading without the full investigations by both scholars and policymakers. There is now a plethora of evidence from multiple sources that Vietnamese cannabis cultivation activities in Australia have continued to flourish in an emergent way, including there being potential numbers of undocumented Vietnamese migrants involved (AUSTRAC, 2020). Unfortunately, after more than three decades, drug trafficking by Vietnamese criminals involved at all levels with different trends and patterns, and they have also changed both the organisational structure and the related modus operandi across the Australian states and territories. Yet, scrutinizing the nexus of immigration and crime among Vietnamese communities in Australia is still lacking. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2018, i.e. ABC News, probed their audience that "you have almost certainly seen cannabis grow houses – you just don't know it." In fact, this situation existed a long time ago, at least since the 2000s in the Vietnamese syndicates, according to the author of the bestseller – *Green Roads*, To Giang, who was a cannabis grower and sentenced to 30 months in Melbourne. This first memoir of a Vietnamese criminal overseas (in Australia) has been approved and published under the strictest censorship communication system in the Vietnam-communist state.

He was a young, well-known journalist/reporter of the local television channel and left his official career to come to Australia with a 'big game' ambitions – entering the cannabis industry. Through his connections, he became an apprentice cannabis grower for a Vietnamese boss just a few months later. Depending on the specific location's figures, either one-storey traditional houses or two-storey luxury buildings, he and his team would build up relevant scenarios to show off their suitable players, such as a hardworking worker, a wealthy Asian intellectual, and so on. While some have requested to stay and look after the the hundreds of cannabis plants inside, he often returned to the cannabis house in the evening to take care them before moving to other rental places to sleep. This continuous circle was applied into a 6-week process, from growing baby weeds (vegetative stage) to cultivating flowering buds (flowering stage). The benefit's rate was divided into their specific roles: manager, facilitator, and grower. Some heavy-harvesting cultivations can earn up to millions of Australian dollars at the 'street price.' After one year immersed in the green (cannabis) market with both achievements and unsuccessfulness, he was arrested in August 2018.

He was deported to Vietnam after completing his imprisonment period in 2020 and also spent with 'post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD) and stigmatized attitudes from many beloved ones and friends before writing and releasing his real stories in the world of the "dân chăn mèo" (i.e. "herding cats"). As his autobiography described and explained this term, he had become a mouse and one that could catch cats. In particular, he is a grower; others players acted as facilitators to set up, arrange, and design his cannabis indoor. Even at the highest level, he achieved the boss's level in this *green* (marijuana) industry. For those all-in-one players, his actor must create several scenarios with sophisticated cunningness to overtake monitoring of the police (i.e. the cats). The 254-page non-fiction book outlines the first cannabis insider perspective in Australia. An English translation version is expected to released soon.



The Author of the Green Roads: An Autobiography of Vietnamese 'dân chăn mèo' in Australia. He is now a personal trainer in his homeland after being deportated from Melbourne prison. (Source: the Author's permission)

Herding cats: Vietnamese style

The illegal employment of Vietnamese 'crop-sitters' in Australia, who are employed to stay in the grow house to take care of cannabis plants indoors (*trồng cần* or *trồng cỏ* in Vietnamese) is ongoing. Yet, they continue to be recruited to support the processes for hydroponic cannabis growth, despite law enforcement agencies attempting to crack down on these activities in recent decades. As To Giang shared his detailed experience as a crop-sitter, he conveyed that they can design and set up the rosy garden outside combined with romantic sceneries among de facto images that have cheated and tricked police's monitors and blinded their neighbors (chapter 6: The Rosy House). There are intricate worlds inside each cannabis house with a mixture of plants, electricity-and-water systems, dehumidifiers, and diverse equipment. Those cannabis growers are also wise to steal electricity sources through unique techniques to support artificial sunlight with up to one hundred 600W lights operating a 12-hour daily. That means, regularly, they need at least 720.000W per day to maintain the needed high temperature (p.45). Yet, these homes are also provided several pesticide liquids and chemical supplies. All resources are utilized for agricultural operations, and thus legal permission in Australia to grow cannabis is very easy to buy.

However, apart from Australian-Vietnamese citizens and Vietnamese legal visa holders, many 'crop-sitters' are Vietnamese-born undocumented migrants. Vietnamese students and tourists travel willingly to Australia to earn thousands of dollars minding cannabis crops. Some of them have used the formal ways to come to Australia, such as marriage and political asylum visas, according to To Giang noted in the *Green Roads*. Even though relating to the 39 Vietnamese deaths in Essex (2019), he also confirmed that those persons with the tragic bad luck were very similar with him, as they sought to leave their homeland to look for a new 'heaven' and openly accepted the lorry-smuggling journey of their free will (pp.150-151).

An eerie glow from the lighting hangs over the cannabis plants (source: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-02/inside-the-grow-houses-of-australias-illegal-cannabis-trade/9889304?nw=0&r=HtmlFragment)

Recently, according to Australian authorities, at least 2,340 Vietnamese overstayed their visas in 2018 and remained living in Australia. Many of them have become potential targets for recruitment into this multi-billion-dollar enterprise involving Vietnamese organized crime syndicates. It is estimated that a single residential property can at least earn around $185,000 in just three months after cannabis harvesting. According to the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC, 2020), many Vietnamese criminal syndicate offenders are undocumented migrants. Vietnam is considered the top 10 remittance recipients, with most sources from Vietnamese communities in the United States, Canada, and Australia (at least 17.2 billion USD in 2020). However, this exciting figure does not reflect on the rest of the 'dirty' money as the author of the *Green Roads* illustrates involves illicit activities, including growing indoor cannabis. According to his autobiography, Vietnamese cannabis actors have created many different settings to remit their illicit earns into their homeland via the transfer money services run by Vietnamese companies.

Looking Forward to Future Research

The clandestine nature of cannabis cultivation by ethnic minorities (Vietnamese) in Australia often creates inherent challenges in conducting reliable empirical research, particularly to non-Australian citizens. Yet, the literature on these activities tends to rely on media sources, government reports or accounts given by LEAs, which are likely to lead inherently to unreliable and often sensationalized or re-contextualized organized crime's modus operandi (Ganapathy & Broadhurst, 2008). Therefore, to sufficiently understand those groups' organizational structure and modus operandi, one more in-depth research to explore 'inside stories' about Vietnamese organized indoor cannabis cultivation should be conducted based on a mixed methods study.

Currently, Australian law enforcement agencies are considering those Vietnamese groups as set up into three levels – head (who organize and manage the whole process), facilitator (who provide spiritual or material assistance in cultivation), and crop-sitter (who look after cannabis plants). In contrast, the Green Roads' memoir of Vietnamese cannabis insiders unveiled more details about the structured networks used to overcome police surveillance. This includes the demand side, equipment suppliers, brokers (middleman), electricity-and-water brokers, harvesters, cleaners, trash-delivers, etc. This non-fiction work might well be considered the most insightful detail of why and how *'dân chăn mèo'* arrange and design inclusive scenarios to maintain their million dollar industry. At least, combined with testimonial evidence from court records, this research can conceivably reveal almost all states and territorial jurisdictions related to Vietnamese cannabis cases via Austlii (Australasian Legal Information Institute). As Ganapathy and Broadhurst (2008, p. 5) recommended that "with many different legal, linguistic, cultural and religious traditions of Southeast Asia organized crime activities, applying a triangulation of approaches and sources should be encouraged to conduct empirical research."

Based on the press and police statements, many Vietnamese students and tourists are traveling to Australia to earn thousands of dollars minding cannabis crops while working as a cannabis crop-sitter. Examining over 300 Vietnamese cannabis case studies documented within the *Austlii* since the 2000s, the next stage of research will identify the practical issues to explain why undocumented Vietnamese migrants have so quickly come to dominate the cannabis cultivation market. In particular, the study will endeavor to examine how criminals have preyed upon those crop-sitters to look after hydroponic cannabis setups worth millions of dollars. In addition, this upcoming research will explore the typical characteristics of crop-sitters and the factors that have influenced their decisions to join these illegal markets. By doing this, lastly, the project will contribute to discussing effective measures to improve immigration policies and enhance law enforcement capabilities to prevent Vietnamese organized crime from future illicit cannabis activities.

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