

*CRAFTING A NEW SELF IN DIASPORA: A STUDY OF THE 1.5 GENERATION
OF VIETNAMESE AMERICANS*

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study on the identity construction process of members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans through the analysis of their personal narratives. By focusing on strategies used by informants when crafting their narratives instead of looking at narratives as evidence of experience, this study moves away from traditional use of life-narratives. The findings show that to members of the 1.5 generation serve as sites where they can make sense of their disrupted and chaotic life, and where they highlight their struggles to survive in a new homeland with a haunting past. Narrative to them, therefore, is a process of identity formation. In other words, narrative is a process that produces the self that they want to show the world and perhaps a process through which they can make sense of their chaotic and traumatic life.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Hue, Vietnam after the America-Vietnam war was a defining experience for me, which helps shape my interest in Vietnamese Americans. Because Hue used to belong to the American-supported Southern Government, the city physically and mentally bears the relics of the war and the existence of the faraway America.¹ As a little girl, I would see street vendors purchasing war scrap, look at amputated veterans in the streets and hear songs celebrating Vietnam's victory on the radio every day. In secondary school, when I was mature enough to consciously learn things around me, I would see some of my friends wear beautiful clothes that they claimed to have been sent from America by their relatives. Back then, my thought about that was, "Well, their relatives must be really rich to have all of these sent for them." Also, in conversations with elder people who are my parents' close friends; I would hear them talk about their own time or their friends' in re-education camps, their yearning for the past and their dream to join with Vietnamese friends and relatives in America.²

Of course in those days, I only heard these in really intimate conversations in which I was lucky enough to be included. My parents themselves did not actively participate in the war; they did not take any side. However, my father's family background made him become more sympathetic with those who worked for the Southern Vietnam government. My grandfather had been in the French army and had converted to Catholicism, which later turned out to be a stigma for his family when the Communists took over the North. Those chapters in his life made his children suffer a lot of discrimination from the Vietnamese governmental offices where they

worked later in life. My father was denied many chances for promotion and could never make his dream of studying abroad come true. Such experiences made his heart turn to those who worked for the Southern government. I came to know about the Vietnamese refugees that way. In other words, their identities were embedded in all the stories I was lucky enough to hear, even before I came to study in the U.S.

When I arrived in the U.S., in Lawrence – a Midwestern university town where there is not a big Vietnamese community, I continued to wonder about Vietnamese refugees. I felt the urge to hear what they themselves had to say about how the war and their escape to the U.S. impacted their life stories. I contended that what I heard about them in Vietnam is just one side of a coin. I could not help asking myself: What happened to them during and after the War? How did they cope with disruptions caused by the war and its aftermath? How did the disruptions in their lives affect their identity representation? These questions continued to obsess me and inform my research. The deeper I went in my own research, the more I realized that Vietnamese Americans are by no means a homogeneous group. They differ in terms of class, gender, political views and so on. Above all, they differ in terms of generation, which in my opinion, is a highly important aspect once it comes to deal with identity representation. I decided to focus my study on the 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans – those who migrated as children - due to the fact that their experiences in both Vietnam and America are at play in the process of integrating into the new culture. I wanted to know how this generation moved from being Vietnamese to Vietnamese Americans.

Created by scholars of post 1965 immigrants, *1.5 generation* is used to refer to immigrants who were born in a different country and came to the U.S at their early age. However, it still is a controversial concept in terms of what age span it should cover. For

example, in their study, Min Zhou and Carl Bankston (1998) classify foreign-born children arriving between 5 and 12 years of age as *1.5 generation* children and those arriving as adolescents as first *generation* children. Meanwhile, Rumbaut's definition of the *1.5 generation* included those arriving at adolescence. In this study, I employ Rumbaut's classification because there is a qualitative difference between those who arrive as adolescents and those who arrive as adults (classified as first *generation*). Also, I use the term *1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans* to refer only to the people who arrived in the U.S after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and during the 1980s and 90s (boat people) because of my specific scope of my project.

Narratives and identity construction

I choose to use life narratives by members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans as sites where I can look into how they construct their identity because, like Lawler suggests, we all tell stories about our lives, both to ourselves and to others; and it is through such stories that we make sense of our selves, of the world, and of our relationships to others.³

Chamberlayne et al. argue that:

To understand one's self and others, we need to understand our own histories and how we have come to be what we are. We make our own history but not under conditions of our own choosing, and we need to understand these conditions of action more, if our future making of our own history is to produce outcomes closer to our intentions and projects.⁴

Besides, the process of autobiographical narration, with its delving into the past and into memory, forms an important part of identity construction and a means of experiencing past experiences that shape, and allow greater understanding of, the present self. As McNays suggests, it incorporates aspects of identity which transcend the traditionally oppositional humanist and post-structuralist views on identity construction, as:

The idea of narrative shares the poststructural emphasis on the constructed nature of identity; there is nothing inevitable or fixed about the narrative coherence that may emerge from the flux of events. Yet, at the same time, the centrality of narrative to a sense of the self suggests that there are powerful constraints or limits to the ways in which identity may be changed.⁵

Life narratives integrate the constraints and influences of structure and discourse with the intentionality of the individual, and the narrative model of identity mediates the tension between stasis and change without denying that either are aspects of selfhood, implying there is never a complete closure or an essential fixity to human nature.⁶

Indeed, there is a play between who I am as something continuous and permanent, and the idea that I have been and might be different. I give meaning to my identity through the construction of a story, integrating the self through time, flux, contradiction, change and possibility. Therefore, I contend that narratives express the experiences and values of the narrators, while simultaneously constructing, formulating and remaking those values and experiences, in an active and reflexive process that links epistemology, methodology and ontology.

In *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*, Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett argue that

analyses of personal narratives, beyond the contributions they make to specific areas of empirical research, can also serve to reorient theories about the relationship between the individual and the social by calling attention to the social and cultural dynamics through which individuals construct themselves as social actors. In doing so, they have the potential constructively to intervene in the theoretical impasse resulting from the collision between skepticism of hegemonic individualism, on the one hand, and the persistent,

even increasingly urgent interest in understanding selfhood and human agency, on the other.⁷

[...]

Personal narrative analysis demonstrates that human agency and individual social action is best understood in connection with the construction of selfhood in and through historical specific social relationship and institution. Second, the analyses emphasize the narrative dimension of selfhood; that is, well-crafted personal narrative analyses not only reveal the dynamics of agency in practice but also can document its construction through culturally embedded narrative forms that, over an individual's life, impose their own logics and thus also shape both life stories and lives.⁸

Their view on the self as a social construction and as a manifestation of the social dynamics paves way for my exploration of the identity presentation by the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans. I consider the use of personal narrative analyses very useful for my own work given my interest in both the roles of personal and social dynamics in the process of identity construction and presentation.

On the concept of the self/selfhood in autobiographies, Visweswaran writes, "The autobiographical is not a mere reflection of self, but another entry point into history, of community refracted through self."⁹ Similarly, in her essay, the *Uses of Autobiography*, Linda Steiner notes, "in writing our lives, we come to know ourselves with a particular social-political identity."¹⁰ As Steiner further suggests, "autobiographies are social-cultural tales about narrators' relations—close and distant, intimate and strained—with their own multiply intersecting communities as well as with 'Others.'"¹¹ In the same line of thought, in their article "Narrating the Self," Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps points out the inseparability between self and narrative. They write,

Personal narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience. In this sense, narrative and self are inseparable. Self is here broadly understood to be an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the-world, including a sense of one's past and future (62, 106). We come to know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others.¹²

Steiner, Visweswaran, and Ochs and Capps here concur that autobiography is an indication of a created self-- a self that is at once under construction via the act of writing, and in conversation with its own cultural context, yet straining against, and reaching beyond the confines of that context. In his book *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin labels this "the extended-self," "the self-defined by and transacted in narrative process."¹³ In the same line of thought, Smith and Watson note in their text *Reading Autobiography*, "Experience, then, is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in a social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural economic, and interpsychic relations."¹⁴ In many ways, the notion of the self/identity is constantly constructed, and embedded in the social and historical context. I particularly find this notion of self/identity as constructed, multiple, situational and interrelated helpful for the understanding of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans and the ways they identify themselves given the fact that their experiences embody traumas, change of locations and circumstances. Their identities can never be seen as fixed or separated from the multi-social/cultural contexts that their experiences encapsulate.

A brief history of Vietnamese immigration

In order to understand how members of the 1.5 generation construct and represent their identity through oral narrative, it is crucial that we learn about the history of the Vietnamese immigration to the United States since that history can provide some very important indicators as

to why members of the 1.5 generation pick certain themes to talk about when asked about their lives. The history of Vietnamese immigration to the United States is relatively recent. Prior to 1975, most Vietnamese people residing in the United States were spouses and children of American servicemen in Vietnam. On April 30, 1975, “the fall of Saigon” ended the Vietnam War and prompted the first of three waves of immigration from Vietnam to the United States. Vietnamese who had worked closely with Americans during the Vietnam War feared reprisals by the Communist party. 125,000 Vietnamese citizens departed their native country during the spring of 1975. They were airlifted or fled Vietnam on U.S. military cargo ships and transferred to United States government bases in Guam, Thailand, Wake Island, Hawaii and the Philippines, as part of “Operation New Life.” Subsequently, they were transferred to four refugee centers throughout the United States: Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania.

In 1977, a second wave of Vietnamese refugees began fleeing Vietnam. This wave of emigration lasted until the mid-1980s. The second wave began as a result of the new Communist government’s implementation of economic, political and agricultural policies based on Communist ideology. These policies included “reeducation” and torture of former South Vietnamese military personnel and those presumed friendly to the South Vietnamese cause, the closing of businesses owned by ethnic Chinese Vietnamese, the seizing of farmland and redistributing it, and the mass forced relocation of citizens from urban to rural areas that were previously uncultivated or ruined during the war. During this time approximately two million Vietnamese fled Vietnam in small, overcrowded boats. This group of refugees would come to be known as the “boat people.” Most of the “boat people” fled to asylum camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines or Hong Kong and awaited acceptance by

foreign countries. To assist Vietnamese refugees, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980 which reduced restrictions on entry to the United States. The Refugee Act of 1980 provided a definition of a refugee, created the Office of Refugee Resettlement, set the number of refugee admissions at 50,000 per year (unless in cases of an emergency), and allowed a refugee to adjust his or her status after one year to become a permanent resident and after four more years, to become a United States citizen.¹⁵

The third wave began in mid-1980s and continues to this day. While the first two waves are comprised of political refugees, this last wave is composed of people with various statuses, including Amerasians whose immigration to the U.S was made possible by the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act, former re-education camp detainees and their families, and others who left under the Orderly Departure Program.¹⁶

The Vietnamese exodus and their resettlement in the United States could not have come at a worse time in U.S. history. The Vietnam War was an extremely unpopular war at home: 57,692 American men and women had died and 2,500 were listed as missing in action or as prisoners of war.¹⁷ The war evoked very negative emotions in the American public.

Indeed, the general attitude of the American public at the end of the war was one of hostility towards the Vietnamese refugees. A Gallup Poll taken in May 1975 showed “54 percent of all Americans opposed to admitting Vietnamese refugees to live in the United States and only 36 percent were in favor with 12 percent undecided.”¹⁸ A common concern of the American public was one of economic self-interest – a fear of having jobs taken away as well as having too much public assistance and welfare given to the refugees during the economic recession.¹⁹ The May 12, 1975 issue of Newsweek quoted California Congressman Burt Talcott as having said, “Damn it, we have too many Orientals already. If they all gravitate to California, the tax and

welfare rolls will get overburdened and we already have our share of illegal aliens. The same issue reported this statement by an Arkansas woman, “They say it is a lot colder here than in Vietnam. With a little luck, maybe all those Vietnamese will take pneumonia and die.” Several early studies documented that a substantial number of Americans preferred the exclusion of the refugees from the United States. Apart from specific conditions resulting from the Vietnam War and the economic recession, “this hostile reception given by the American public represented a continuation of racism and hostility toward immigration minority groups that has prevailed and been documented throughout the United States’ history.”²⁰

Despite these attitudes, Vietnamese Americans managed to settle down with the help from many Americans who extended humanitarian aid and sponsored families from refugee camps at the beginning. Several studies have documented their resettlement process, their effort to assimilate and their passage to the model minority stereotype.²¹ Despite the initial efforts from the U.S. government to spread Vietnamese refugees all over the country, Vietnamese Americans nowadays concentrate mostly in Little Saigon in Orange County, California. Little Saigon is a huge and vibrant business and residential district that spans large sections of Westminster and Garden Grove. This area houses approximately two thousand businesses including little cafes, restaurants, grocery stores, beauty salons and professional offices. Over the last thirty years, Vietnamese Americans in Orange County have managed to leave their influence on the place, culturally and economically. This place has become the “ethnic enclave” of the biggest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam. My ethnographic research for this dissertation took place during the summers of 2011 and 2012 in Little Saigon and is based on forty interviews, field notes and artifacts.

Since their plight out of Vietnam to the U.S. over thirty years ago, Vietnamese Americans have established themselves in American society. However, like other Asian Americans, they have been affected by *the perpetual foreigner* and the *inassimilable* stereotypes that continue no matter how many times they are debunked. In a society where race is operated in terms of black and white, Asian Americans do not seem to belong to any side of the paradigm. Indeed, Frank Wu noted this in his groundbreaking book, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*, when he wrote, “In race matters, words matter, too. Asian Americans have been excluded by the very terms used to conceptualize race. People speak of ““American”” as if it means ““white”” and ““minority”” as if it means ““black.”” In that semantic formula, Asian Americans [Vietnamese Americans included], neither black nor white, consequently are neither American nor minority.”²² If this is the case, then how can one make sense of many of my informants’ claims to identify as American? Is their self-identifying as American different from the “American” that Frank Wu refers to? Is being American different for the 1.5 generation than it is for the 2nd generation of Vietnamese Americans?

This dissertation explores such questions through analyzing narratives and narrative strategies in order to study the self-identification process of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans. In most of the cases, the 1.5 generation grows up in across-cultural environment, surrounded by both dominant American and the Vietnamese cultures. Their memories of the motherland are not as clear and fortified as those of their parents to help them remain as Vietnamese as the first generation would expect. However, it is these memories that create more difficulties for them in integrating into the dominant American culture. Inevitably, they have to struggle within a liminal space where the cultural clash happens most severely. Therefore, it is through the study of this generation that we can learn the most about the trajectories of the

struggles that Vietnamese refugees might have dealt with as well as the process through which they identify themselves in order to adapt to U.S culture and establish their standing in the new land. I argue that while the first generation tends to live their lives in diaspora and the second generation tends to detach from it, the 1.5 generation crafts a new self in that diaspora, a process that cannot be found in the first or the second generation whose identity tends to conform to the dominant culture that they grew up in, Vietnamese or American respectively.

As a matter of fact, as children of immigrants, the 1.5 generation are unlike their U.S.-born counterparts, the second generation, because, for the most part, many “1.5-ers” still have tangible connection (language, culture, etc.) to their ancestral land. Moreover, like their parents who make up the first generation, 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans experienced so many disruptions in their lives. They went through the whole or part of the war. To some extent, they lost their country and were forced to immigrate. Many of them lost their loved ones. A lot of them lost everything. In other words, their lives are disrupted. Studying their narratives will help discover how 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans handle the disruptions in their lives. It helps explore how culture influences the way they handle them, and in turn helps inform the way this particular generation represent their identity.

As a result, in this dissertation, I analyze life narratives of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American in an effort to track the various twist and turns in this ambivalent relationship between staying Vietnamese and conforming to the mainstream American culture of Vietnamese Americans. I do so first and foremost because the experience of the 1.5 generation offers a more insightful lens for assessing the so-called “inassimilable” yet “model minority” stereotypes that are directed toward Asian Americans in general and Vietnamese Americans in particular. I also intend with this project to address an additional perceived shortcoming in the

histories of Vietnamese immigrants: namely, a tendency to write such histories from an outsider perspective and treat the Vietnamese American as a homogeneous group that not only simplifies but also distort the whole scenario. In other words, they are typically reduced to numbers and different identity categories such as occupation, age, and class through a process of summation, which in turns provides an incomplete and too simple picture of the Vietnamese Americans in general and members of the 1.5 generation in particular whose life narratives are so tangled and dense that they defy such clear telling.

I started my study on the 1.5 generation by focusing on published life narratives/autobiographies by members of this generation, and my Master thesis was on the construction of the self in selected memoirs. As I moved further with my research, I decided that while the memoirs do provide valuable lenses through which I can learn about this particular generation, the fact that a lot of those memoirs are collaboration between a Vietnamese American and an American somehow prevents me from getting a thorough understanding of this generation because, in my opinion, the perspectives reflected in those memoirs can be colored by different factors including the effort to legitimize the Vietnam War on the American's part. As Yen Le Espiritu observes, "freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees" have been deployed by the U.S. media to "rescue the United States from her disgraceful defeat and to make the Vietnam War as "ultimately necessary, just and successful."²³ Vietnamese Americans, with their memoirs and testimonies, have participated in the making of that narrative. At the same time, Chi-ming Wang pointed out in her article "Politics of Return: Homecoming Stories of the Vietnamese Diaspora" that all together, these memoirs and testimonies create the familiar narrative of "a refugee becoming a model minority that crafts an assimilationist Vietnamese-US identity."²⁴

In the life narratives by my informants, the Vietnamese-US refugee is reconfigured as a cosmopolitan traveler whose encounter with contemporary Vietnam not only raises questions about history and memory as lived discrepantly by Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans but also compels us to reconsider the relations between representation, subjectivity, and the geopolitical history that is crystallized in the body of “Viet Kieu” (diasporic Vietnamese). The memory and movement of the Vietnamese diaspora allow us to capture the complex trans-Pacific politics that is reshaping the meaning of Asian United States today.

The concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘self’

There have been very contradicting concepts of culture set forth by scholars today: culture as “the way of life of a people” and “culture as “the information and identities available from the cultural super market.” These concepts of culture entail in two different types of identity: ethnic identity and market identity. According to Gordon Mathews in his 2000 book *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*, ethnic identity is “often based on the idea of a particular people belonging to a particular place.”²⁵ Market identity, on the other hand, “is based on belonging to no particular place, but rather to the market in both its material and cultural forms – in market-based identity, one’s home is all the world.”²⁶ Recent concepts of self show a similar conceptual dichotomy. Clifford Geertz, in “From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Thinking,” argues that the Western notion of the person as an independent, bounded, unique being is “a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures.”²⁷ Dorinne Kondo writes of “seemingly incorrigible Western assumption about ... the boundedness and fixity of personal identity. ... Contemporary

anthropologists ...myself included, are in the process of grappling with the difficulties and paradoxes of demonstrating of the cultural specificity of selfhood.”²⁸

On the other hand, other recent thinkers have focused on a “post-modern” self-
unbounded by any specific culture. For example, Robert Jay Lifton has come up with the concept
of “the protean self,” whereby we constantly shift and weave and recreate ourselves:

We are becoming fluid and many sided. Without quite realizing it, we have been
evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of time ... Any
one of us can, at any moment, have access to any image or idea originating
anywhere in the contemporary world, or from any cultural moment of the entire
human past²⁹

Similarly, MadanSarup has argued how, in today’s postmodern world, “through the market, one
can put together elements of the complete ‘Identikit’ of a DIY self.”

According to Mathews, these two ideas of self echo our concepts of culture in the way
that” both self and culture are seen by some as belong to a particular place, bounding and
shaping the beings therein, and by others as radically open and free.”³⁰ As a result, Mathews
suggests that this contradiction can be best resolved by “considering self and culture in a
common phenomenological framework: a framework based on how people experience the
world.”³¹ As a matter of fact, it is undeniable that selves are culturally shaped, i.e. selves of
different cultural backgrounds have different ways of experiencing the world. At the same time,
there is some truth to the fragmented postmodern self as suggested by postmodern scholars. With
those different conceptions of culture and identity in mind, I choose to be in the middle ground
where I argue that members of the 1.5 generation, in response to different social/political factors
can and need to forge an identity that they find fit while still conforming to the others. In other

words, they can be both/either Vietnamese and/or American whenever they need to be and however they want to be. The question is: what does it mean to be American or Vietnamese or both? The answer to this question is not simple since their experiences vary.

Methodology and chapter division

To tell the stories of this unique 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans, I have chosen to divide my work into four chapters, each of which covers different aspects of the ambivalent relationship between Vietnamese Americans and Vietnam – the sending country and America – the hosting country. The chapters tend to flow in historical order, following the stages through which members of the 1.5 generation evacuated Vietnam and finally settled themselves in the United States. The **first chapter**, entitled **South Vietnam Spring 1975: A Lost Country, A Devastated People**, treats Fall of Saigon and its aftermath as a defining moment of both the evacuation of Vietnamese out of Vietnam and their exodus to the United States, and in turn a defining moment that fostered/created the shift in how members of the 1.5 generation identify themselves.

In my informants' narratives, disruptions, chaos and eventually displacement after the fall of Saigon and during their time under the new communist regime are considered as the major factors that led to their plight out of Vietnam. In constructing their identity, members of the 1.5 generation in the two different cohorts (people who left right after the war and those who were boat people) presented different perceptions of the Fall of Saigon and its significance in their lives. Those who fled the country in 1975 and a couple of years later talked about the event as if it was something temporary and constructed a somewhat romanticized journey to the new land without much emphasis on the struggle they experienced both in Vietnam and in the U.S. in their

earlier days. Meanwhile, those who identified themselves as boat people presented narratives that are highlighted by hardship and disruptions in every aspect of their lives even right before the Fall of Saigon. Overall, however, most of my informants depicted the event as the starting point of the drastic changes to their lives and considered it as the cause of the many negative experiences later. I would argue that by integrating their personal narrative into the broader historical context of the Vietnam War and highlighting the hardship prior to and during their plight out of Vietnam, members of the 1.5 generation not only reinforce what the grand narrative has to say about refugees/immigrants but also depict themselves as a generation that is defined by hardship and struggle resulted from disruption and displacement caused by the controversial Vietnam War.

After considering the Fall of Saigon and its aftermath as a defining moment in the exodus of Vietnamese people including the 1.5 generation to the United States, I move in **Chapter Two** entitled **A New Journey, a New Homeland for the Uprooted: Tales of The Survivors**, to the different stages through which members of the 1.5 generation resettle in the United States and examine how the process affects the way they represent their identity. The stages that are narrated in their recollection of the experience include leaving Vietnam, being in transit (refugee camps) and initial resettlement process in the United States. While these stages might be read as the chronology of their experience, the themes brought up in the interviews such as being uprooted and disoriented, however, shed light on a different aspect of the 1.5 generation experience. My argument is that the chronological stages are deployed strategically by members of the 1.5 generation in order to make their narratives fit the more official grand narrative of a refugee. This allows them to plug in their personal narratives that are marked by themes of disorientation and uprootedness (somehow little heard of in the more official narratives) in order

to revive their usually forgotten narratives without necessarily breaking away/distancing themselves from the 1st generation.

With **Chapter Three**, entitled **Betrayal, Guilt and Reconciliation**, I intend to focus my investigation on the culture clash that Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation encounter in their passage of crafting their identity. In particular, I argue that members of the 1.5 generation, due to their ties with the Vietnamese culture (embodied by their parents/grandparents and their memories) have to go through a lot of struggles and negotiations to conform to the mainstream American culture while trying to stay Vietnamese in the so-called Vietnamese ethnic identity formation. In the process, they create a different version of Vietnamese culture as a strategy to deal with the culture clash. But how do they do that in the black/white race discourse being Asian (Vietnamese) Americans? What does staying Vietnamese mean to them? How does staying Vietnamese contradict or compliment to their being American?

The finding shows that in order to navigate the trajectories on their way of crafting a new self, members of the 1.5 generation have to go through betrayal and reconciliation with their parents. And in those strategies that they use, they have to deal with guilt as a price they have to pay for their seeking of freedom they thought they needed.

In the discussion in **Chapter Four** entitled **Torn between the Tensions**, I continue the thread I have already set up in the previous chapter by focusing on the concept of home/homeland as well as on the strategies members of the 1.5 generation use to maintain their relationship with members of their extended families and their own children. In the process, I will be examining the paradoxes they have to face with in order to navigate the trajectories in the process of crafting for themselves a new identity. The narratives by my informants are permeated

with paradoxes which, I would argue, define them as a generation torn in between the Vietnamese and American cultures.

Implications and Limitations

This dissertation, *Crafting a New Self in Diaspora: A Study on the 1.5 Generation of Vietnamese Americans*, explores oral histories with the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans regarding their identity representation based on life narratives and is intended as a major contribution to the fields of Asian American Studies, life narratives as methodology, ethnic identities and identity representation. The project has strong transnational components in both theoretical and methodological approach, and draws upon the fields of post-colonial theory, post-modern feminist thought in oral history and ethnography, Asian American Studies, and immigration studies. In both method and intended outcome, the project is a significant contribution to the scholarship on Asian American and ethnic studies in general and in Vietnamese Americans in particular. Since the scholarship on Vietnamese Americans has a strong focus on the 1st and 2nd generation; this project will be among the pieces that help fill the gap still left for the 1.5 generation. Besides, it may also be useful in providing lenses through which more studies can be done on members of the 1.5 generation other ethnicities such as Laotian and Cambodian or Chinese Vietnamese who left their countries in a similar fashion. As a project in the field of American Studies, it is also intended for community outreach in the sense that it gives members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans an opportunity to speak for themselves for each of them is a theorist in their own right.

Much as I tried to cover as much as I can on the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans and their identity construction in this project, I could not help failing to address certain aspects that lead to some limitations, both objective and subjective.

First of all, due to the time limit and many other factors such as the focus only on the 1.5 generation, this project does not really take gender and class into consideration although I do mention those here and there throughout the four chapters. I am aware of the fact that Vietnamese Americans come from different classes in Vietnam which affects their experience as well as how they identify themselves. Furthermore, I am also fully aware that while the majority of my informants identify themselves as refugees, their difference in terms of gender can potentially mean that their refugee experiences might not be the same. Therefore, a project on how class and gender affect the way members of the 1.5 generation construct their identity can be very useful to provide a more in-depth and well-rounded understanding of this particular generation.

Secondly, while I do make comparison and contrast here and there between the 1.5 generation and the 1st and 2nd generations, this is not really the center of this dissertation. Due to the commonality that I believe that these three generations have when it comes to identity, a more detailed comparison and contrast among the three generations will be beneficial in studying the Vietnamese American community.

Thirdly, again, due to its focus, the project does not have any connection with other ethnicities whose experience can be similar such as Laotian or Cambodian.

Finally, because this is a qualitative research project that relies heavily on the analysis of life narratives and participant observation, the findings and analysis in this dissertation only

represents the experience of the people who took part in the project and cannot stand for the entire generation.

¹ According to the July 1954 Geneva Agreements, Vietnam was divided into Northern Vietnam and Southern Vietnam. After the Agreement, the U.S. replaced the French as a political backup for Ngo Dinh Diem, then Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam and he asserted his power in the South. For more details, see George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dial Press, 1967).

² After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, most people who worked for the Southern Vietnam government tried to flee the country for fear of being executed by the Communist. Those who failed to do that were sent to reeducation camps in which they were supposed to be "straightened."

³ Lawler S., *Mothering the Self: mothers, daughters subjects* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴ *The turn to biographical methods in social science*, ed. Bornat J Chamberlayne P, Wengraf T (London: Routledge, 2000), p.7.

⁵ McNay L., *Gender and agency: reconfiguring the subject in feminist and social theory* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000). p.80.

⁶ Haynes K. Reedy P, "'I Did It My Way': stories of professional and managerial identity," in *European Group for Organizational Studies: Organizational Politics and the Politics of Organizations Conference* (2002).

⁷ *Ibid*, p.2.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Visweswaran K., *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press 1994. p. 137.

¹⁰ Steiner L. "The Uses of Autobiography." *American Cultural Studies*. Ed. Catherine A. Warren and Mary Douglas Vavrus. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. 115-133. p15.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.116.

¹² Ochs E. & Capps L. "Narrating the Self." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 25 (1996), 20-21. pp. 19-43

¹³ Eakin, P. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. New York: Cornell UP, 1999. p.101.

¹⁴ Smith S. & Watson J. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.) p.25.

¹⁵ See, for example, Cheng and Yang 1996; Freeman 1995; Rumbaut 1985, 1989; and Lowe, 1999.

¹⁶ For a more detailed description of the three waves, see Scott C.S. Stone and John E. McGowan, *Wrapped in the Wind's Shawl: Refugees in Southeast Asia and the Western World* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1980).

¹⁷ For more details, see Capps W., *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).

¹⁸ *Time*, May 19, 1975

¹⁹ One might argue that this is typically the attitude to any groups of refugees or immigrants to the U.S., the Vietnamese included.

²⁰ Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, ed. Ronald H. Bayor, The New Immigrants Series (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999). p.30.

²¹ For more information, please see Cheng and Yang 1996; Freeman 1995; Rumbaut 1985, 1989; and Lowe, 1999.

²² Wu F., *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (Basic Books, 2001).

²³ See Espiritu L., "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: US Press Coverage of the the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon'," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006).

²⁴ Wang C., "Politics of Return: Homecoming Stories of the Vietnamese Diaspora," *positions* 21, no. 1 (2013).

²⁵ Gordon Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket* (London: Routledge, 2000). p.9.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Local Knowledge*. p.59.

²⁸ Dorinne Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). pp. 26-37.

²⁹Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York Basic Books, 1993). pp. 1-17.

³⁰Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*.p.12.

³¹Ibid.

Chapter 1

South Vietnam Spring 1975: A Lost Country, a Devastated People

When the Communist forces invaded South Vietnam on April 30, 1975, they had succeeded in their domination of Vietnam. It was as if a black curtain had fallen on our country. All of former South Vietnam fell into despair. All the military and naval forces dispersed, and most of them surrendered to the communist forces. My father also presented himself at the Communist naval headquarters to avoid trouble from the new government. My parents left Saigon to return to my father's home town of Song Cau, with both joy and sorrow in their hearts.

To the majority of South Vietnamese people the Fall of Saigon marked the end of an era of freedom and prosperity of the country. The speaker above – I'll call her Van – was a 10 year-old Vietnamese child whose father served in the South Vietnam army during the war, and who, with her entire family, fled to America on one of the many small boats to finally settle down in Little Saigon.¹ She lived in a big one-storied house on Dale Street, Garden Grove, California – a town with a population of more than 200,000; most of whom are of Asian and Hispanic descent.² The large and comfortable living room of her three-bedroom house was full of South California sunshine and the air was filled with the fragrance of the roses from her front yard. When I visited, her mother and her elder brother's family from Ann Harbor, Michigan were also visiting and they were planning for a trip to Disney Land. "Thanks to God, we are all in America now,"

she said, “but I will never forget those days, those horrible days in Vietnam with the Communists.”³

In Van’s story, her family came to stand for all boat people’s families whose lives were so tangled and disrupted by the end of the Vietnam War with the Fall of Saigon in April 1975.⁴ Most Vietnamese people in America speak of the event as a turning point in the history of South Vietnam or even the death of the country. For those who were lucky enough evacuate Vietnam right after the war, the Fall of Saigon means saying farewell to their homeland and being transitioned to different refugee camps before settling down in America and other countries in a new land and a new culture.⁵ For “boat people”, it is often referred to as the beginning of a period of repression and displacements. Often separated from their fathers, most of whom were imprisoned or sent to re-education camps, children like Van were left in the care of mothers or relatives who struggled to survive in the harsh economy in the post-war Vietnam and the discrimination against them due to the ties their families had with the Americans. Many even lost family members during the war or were made to work really hard with their parents in New Economic Zones – undeveloped areas designated by the new Communist regime as part of their efforts to speed up the economy growth after the war as well as to punish those who were connected to the South Vietnam government. Families were fragmented by war, mass relocation, re-education camps, New Economic Zones, death, torture and ultimately escapes out of the country. Traditional Vietnamese notions of family obligation, value of education and dignity were critically challenged as former Southern Vietnamese struggled to go through disruptions in their lives.

During those times, both Vietnamese in America and those who remained in Vietnam experienced multiple displacements that transformed their identity as men, women and children,

their perception of who they were as victims of war, and members in their families as citizens of the long-gone South Vietnam. These refugees, especially those who came as children, were to encounter even more transformations during their resettlement stages in the United States.

When I started my field work in Orange County in 2011, I found a well-established Vietnamese community. Orange County is home to 189,455 Vietnamese people who concentrate mainly in Westminster and Garden Grove with the population of 33,819 and 54,029 respectively.⁶ As a community, they have managed to leave significant influences in the cultural, economic and political development on the area.

Little Saigon in Orange County has long been considered as the center of Vietnamese culture in the United States or “the refugees’ capital” as humorously called by many of my informants. It is now a huge and vibrant community dotted with a plethora of suburban-style strip malls containing a mixture of Vietnamese and Chinese Vietnamese businesses including restaurants, grocery stores, nail and beauty salons, professional offices and social services. As with many other Vietnamese American communities, competing mom-and-pop restaurants that serve Vietnamese cuisine, especially pho- a popular Vietnamese dish - are abundant. There are approximately 200 restaurants in the area of Little Saigon and spilling over to Garden Grove, Fountain Valley, Santa Ana and Huntington Beach. Nevertheless, the main focus of Little Saigon is the Bolsa Avenue center where Asian Garden Mall and Little Saigon Plaza are considered the heart. Inside Asian Garden Mall, you can have pho beef noodle soup for lunch, get your hair cut, shop for clothes and get food to take home for dinner. What both tourists and Vietnamese Americans find even more attractive about the place is you can do it all in Vietnamese, which makes it a favorite haven for the Vietnamese elders who long for a taste of the far-away Vietnam.

Both the city of Westminster and Garden Grove have been affected in many unique ways by Vietnamese Americans, not only by their businesses but also by their memories. In 2003, The Westminster War Memorial – a phenomenal structure complete with an eternal flaming torch and two soldiers, American and Vietnamese, posed as heroes of equal physical stature – was dedicated in a park called Freedom on All American Way (name of a street), an extension of Westminster City Hall. Six years later, in the spring of 2009, the Vietnamese Boat People Monument was dedicated in Westminster Memorial Park’s Asian Garden of Peaceful Eternity. The main focus of the monument contains four statues on a slab within a pool, the slab resembling a raft. The figures on the raft are of a man, an older woman and a younger woman holding a young child. Surrounding the memorial lay fifty four blocks of stone on which the names of over 6,000 deceased boat people are engraved. In addition to their meaningful significance of the former as a site of both memorialization of the cooperation between South Vietnam and the U.S. and commemoration of the fall of Saigon, and the latter as a site of worship for the deceased, these monuments testify to the economic and political clout of Little Saigon and of the Vietnamese community in Orange County.

CONCEPTS OF CULTURAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

The traditional practice of anthropology is largely based on the conception of culture that has very problematic connotations that anthropologist Lila Abu-Lugod refers to as “homogeneity, coherence and timelessness.” This school of anthropology is under rigorous critique during 1980s by Marxists, poststructuralists and feminists, particularly in terms of representation and epistemological reflection. Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, in the introduction to *Bedouin Stories*, wrote that this concept of culture seems to work as an essential tool for

making “other.” She argued that in producing a discourse on culture that explains the “difference,” “anthropology ends up also constructing, producing and maintaining difference.”⁷ Abu-Lughod in another article, “Writing Against Culture,” provides a further critique that culture essentializes and over-emphasizes coherence.⁸ Because of such problems, along with a tendency to imbue relationships with power, Abu-Lughod suggests that “perhaps anthropologists should consider strategies for writing against culture”.⁹ In my opinion, what she means by this is that ethnographers should reorient themselves away from seeking totality, or big, comprehensive studies which present “a culture,” and instead offer a focus on “connections and interconnections,” involving particulars, including the place of the ethnographer in the community and in the study. We, as researchers, should present specific life stories and texts, and using terms such as practice and discourse, which are “useful because they work against the assumption of boundedness, not to mention the idealism . . . of the culture concept”.¹⁰ By presenting fieldwork-based ethnographies and refusing to generalize, “one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness”.¹¹

The aforementioned conception of culture also entails in the assumption that there is a so-called “authentic/ethnic” identity. On the one hand, this assumption advocates a pluralist approach of understanding identity. Indeed, Michael Fischer argues that the “process of assuming an ethnic identity is an insistence on the pluralist, multi-dimensional or multi-faceted concept of self: one that can be many different things, and [...] a crucible for the wider social ethos of pluralism.” On the other hand, it risks essentializing identity and considering identity as fixed/immutable. In *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, feminist ethnographer Kamala Visweswaran problematizes this emphasis by noting, “this emphasis on pluralism leads to a

notion of ‘trying on identities,’ which obscures the fact that identities, no matter how strategically deployed, are not always chosen, but are in fact constituted by relations of power always historically determined.”¹² Here Visweswaran suggests that identities are performed, and how they are performed depends not only on the contexts but also on the power relations that matter in those contexts. In other words, identities are seen as performance, constructed, staged, constituted by context and are themselves asserted as partial accounts. She goes on to argue, “moreover, identities, because they cannot be located solely in the continuity of a culture or tradition, are not conjuncture and not essential.”¹³ This conjuncturalist approach to identity, in emphasizing the conditional or contingent mirrors the insights of recent feminist theory as well.¹⁴ Visweswaran also calls for a different view on identity arguing that feminist ethnography can “consider how identities are multiple, contradictory, partial, and strategic.”¹⁵

Despite the above problematic implications of the notions of culture and ethnic identity, a considerable part of immigration theory and literature focuses on ethnic and national/cultural identity and their interrelationship as part of the larger process of acculturation. As an aspect of acculturation, ethnic identity can be thought of in terms of the theoretical framework that has been used to understand acculturation. Earlier models of acculturation recognizing only assimilation or marginalization have been under rigorous critiques due to their limited scopes. More recent studies on immigrants and ethnic identity have started to take into account the culture, identity attitudes, and preferences of the immigrants, the characteristics of the place of settlement, and the interaction among these factors. For instance, Zhou and Bankston’s study of ethnic and racial identities adopted by second-generation adolescents of Vietnamese origin in Versailles Village discerned a form of adaptation, but in this case breaking out of the Vietnamese immigrant circle means being absorbed into the disadvantaged minority subculture that

surrounds them, which was perceived by their parents as downward assimilation. According to Zhou and Bankston, participation in social relationships and acceptance of group norms and values are interrelated; the more individuals associate with a particular group, the greater the normative conformity to behavioral standards and expectations prescribed by the group. In this way, the ethnic community helps maintain cultural standards, establish role models, reinforce parental authority, and, in general, reproduce effective social controls over children. Equally important, stable social relations in the community facilitate the maintenance or expansion of social capital even in families which are not intact. Also contrary to assimilationist perspective, in the case of the first generation, the robust social mobility of the first generation of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants has been correlated to the cohort's ability to retain aspects of Vietnamese culture. That is, in making places for themselves, many Vietnamese refugees and immigrants have retained Vietnamese cultural ideals of the family such as "hieu" (filial piety) and of the community such as "nghia" (the obligation to participate rather than withdraw from societal affairs).¹⁶

Current thinking emphasizes that acculturation, rather than being a linear process of change requiring giving up one's culture of origin and assimilating into a new culture is best understood as a two-dimensional process through a more interactional model due to the complexity of the issues surrounding ethnic identity, immigration, and adaptation.¹⁷ In such a model, ethnic identity is recognized as being fluid and contextual.¹⁸ Most theorists agree that, particularly among minority groups, the notion of ethnic identity is constructed and reconstructed depending on the situations.¹⁹ Individuals' and groups' attempts to address ethnic boundaries and meanings of ethnicity are best understood as a constant exchange between individual identity and

group organization.²⁰ In other words, the way we construct our ethnicity is the result of structure and agency, the interchange between ethnic groups and the larger society.

Scholarly interest in refugees, especially those from Southeast Asia, has primarily been honed around compiling first-hand narratives as a way to explore the varying circumstances under which they left the sending countries, and to construct a more complex present history.²¹ Other sociological and ethnographical writings on refugees tend to examine how the refugees experienced disrupts traditional cultures and how these cultures are transformed and continued to develop when refugees adapt to the life in new environment.²² There is also a growing body of eloquent memoirs told by surviving Vietnamese refugees themselves.²³

This project is directed towards a different path: it is intended to examine *not* so much *how* “culture” changes when transplanted into a different setting, but more on how refugees remake their identities in different social/political situations. I seek to explore how Vietnamese Americans have been made subject to US racial formation before and after their arrival in the U.S. Here I draw my cues from anthropologist Aihwa Hong, whose innovative study of the Cambodian refugees in Oakland, California and their trajectories to citizenship provides a more nuanced examination of the whole identification process instead of focusing on only a few stages as if they are already cut-and-dry.²⁴ In this project I seek to understand how members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans craft their own lives and meanings, their memories of the homeland, as well as their triumphs and struggles to survive in the new land. I plan to do so by tracing the movement of Vietnamese refugees of the 1.5 generation from the Vietnam War era to the Fall of Saigon and its aftermath, the plight out of the country, and finally settlement in the United States. My analysis is based on the refugees’ life narratives. In particular, I focus on their own perspectives on their daily practices – especially their viewpoints on how families,

communities and relations between women and men, between parents and children and between members of extended families changed by the war and the flee out of Vietnam; and how these experiences along with the new cultural environment affect their lives/identities in the United States.

I specifically look at life narratives of members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans as a site where they construct their identity in relation to the broader cultural/socio-political contexts in which they experienced the world. I contend that to the members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans, life narratives are not just their accounts of what happened in their lives; they are, in many ways, strategies and forms of survival. My research also shows that the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese's version of refugee narrative is much more complicated than what is shown in both the assimilationist and the multi-cultural discourses.

According to the assimilation discourse, immigrants arrive on U.S. shores soaked in memory: their family names, sense of self, and relationship to community all refer to the past. However, be "reborn" as Americans, they must dry themselves off, releasing/erasing those memories and the cultures of their homeland. In the same step, they embrace modernity, individualism, and progress. To the extent that memory-making involve a trip into the past, memories and modernity do not mix.

This is not to say that researchers who are influenced by an assimilation model do not recognize the impact of memories – especially bad memories of the flight from communism – on Vietnamese Americans' self-construction. For example, James Freeman (1989) penned down the thoughts and feelings of fourteen Vietnamese refugees who had escaped Vietnam at the end of the war and settled into communities in central California in the 1980s. During a time when the prevalence of anti-Asian hate crimes rose; many of those acts targeted recent immigrants and

refugees from Southeast Asia suspected of stealing jobs and lowering wages, “showing Vietnamese as humans immobilized by a complex grief was one way to intervene into the dehumanizing stereotypes and popular misconceptions that surrounded them. But this portrayal, though sympathetic, leaves intact the idea that over time, success in America requires abandoning the cultures and histories that once define their communities.”²⁵

Meanwhile, the multi-cultural discourse relies on the notion that immigrants and refugees can do better if they cling to their traditions and original cultures. In a context where Vietnamese are pitted against other racial minorities, the past can become “part of a narrative of cultural values that are ostensibly superior to those of the native-born minorities, particularly blacks.”²⁶ David Palumbo-Liu (1999) elaborates upon the intricate logistical maneuvers by which the idea of Asian Americans as a “model minority” reinvigorates American exceptionalism. References to “tradition,” especially Confucian traditions, a concept I will discuss later, that demand obedience to authority and individual sacrifice for the collective good, end up meshing conveniently with a broader politicized discourse about Asian Americans as upstanding citizens who succeeded in mainstream society without government assistance.²⁷ Shielded from view are the many ways that Vietnamese and other immigrants have drastically changed their traditions in order to survive in their new U.S. settings. For example, Nazli Kibria in her 1993 book argue against the notion that Vietnamese survive and succeed in America because they hang on to tradition. Instead, she shows that Vietnamese families made important changes in gender roles and expectations that allowed them to accommodate, among other things, the demands of the local labor market.²⁸

The production and construction of memory and narratives for Vietnamese Americans is therefore much more complicated than just remembering for themselves what happened in their

life before and after their plight to America. My research shows that members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American employ strategies that involve capturing or creating certain discourse about the past and present, and integrating them into their self-identifying efforts as well as their struggles to survive in different situations prior to and after their arrival in the United States of America. In particular, many of my informants chose to talk about family values in South Vietnam and then talk about how those values were tampered with, setting it up as an explanation for their plight out of the country as well as the betrayals they found themselves in later. In the process, they also create this nostalgic version of Vietnamese national identity.

A Historical Rupture

The history of Vietnam dates back to more than four thousand years and is a turbulent one that is very well-reflected in a Vietnamese folk song: “one thousand years of Chinese domination, one hundred years of the French rule and twenty years of internal Civil War fighting.”²⁹ Colonized or independent, Vietnam had always remained as one united country until the Geneva Agreements of 1954 that divided the country along the 17th parallel.³⁰ The North was given to the Communists under Ho Chi Minh, and the South was to be led by an anti-Communist government under Premier Ngo Dinh Diem. The governments of both North and South Vietnam each claimed to be the only legitimate government of Vietnam, and tried their best to consolidate their positions. The North greatly increased its number of military units and forcefully blocked the flow of refugees south. At the same time the Communists drove thousands of youths north across the 17th parallel and began a reign of terror against the traditional Vietnamese and provincial leadership. Southern Communists, known as the Vietcong, launched an uprising in the South on a slowly accelerating scale so as to avoid undue international attention.³¹

The domino theory, which dominated U.S. foreign policy for 20 years, held that if one small country such as Vietnam fell to the Communists, the neighbouring countries would fall in rapid succession.³² The ultimate effect would be the world domination by the Communists. On that premise the United States provided large-scale economic aid to the South government and sent military advisors and equipment to South Vietnam.³³ Between 1960 and 1962 the Communists upgraded their struggle into a “war of liberation.” They established a political arm in South Vietnam consisting of *Mat Tran Giai Phong Nhan Dan* (the National Liberation Front) and *Dang Cach Mang Nhan Dan* (the People’s Revolutionary Party). Whole battalions and divisions of the North Vietnamese army moved south to join the Vietcong in guerrilla warfare. As the Communist efforts increased, the Diem regime became ever more restrictive, losing what little support it enjoyed. After militant Buddhist demonstrations, the army overthrew Diem in 1963, and South Vietnam was then ruled by a series of military and civilian governments. Military assistance from the United States continued to increase to match the Communist escalation and by 1966 amounted to full-scale military involvement.³⁴ The United States had now replaced the French as the target and rallying point for Vietnamese Communists.

Fearful of international reaction and possible retaliation by the Chinese or Russians, the United States declined to invade North Vietnam. Instead, the United States became mired in a frustrating holding pattern while attempts were made to bolster the political leaders and army of South Vietnam until that country could gain enough popular support to win the war itself.³⁵ In the United States, however, the war was becoming increasingly unpopular. Anti-war activists and protesters led mass demonstrations and gained much support.

In April 1975, the war finally ended with the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese troops. In chaos and panic of a blood bath that ensued, tens of thousands of Vietnamese fled the country

seeking safety and refuge in the United States and other countries. For those who were left behind, the fall of Saigon was the starting point of several displacements and disruptions until they finally escaped the country creating the second wave of Vietnamese refugees that are popularly known as ‘boat people’. For all the refugees, especially for members of the 1.5 generation— both first and second waves - that finally settled in Little Saigon, California, the fall of Saigon and the destruction of South Vietnam began an un-ravelling and re-ordering of family life, and of cultural and personal identity, that has not yet ended.

Before the fall of Saigon

Deep down in their hearts, many refugees are still yearning for Vietnam, not the contemporary Vietnam, but the South Vietnam before 1975. While many are obsessed with nightmares of death, separation, destruction and flight or ocean journey, they also dream of the peaceful time they had despite the war with the Communist. They dream of prosperous and burgeoning Saigon – then capital of South Vietnam, of a country where they enjoyed freedom and family. They also dream of home villages with ponds full of fish and flourishing rice paddies, and their extended family and relatives living within stone’s throw who would help when needed. In their mind, this was time when they were real Vietnamese, before the Fall of Saigon, before they became known as refugees, before their country, and above all, their families and culture were torn apart. Their dreams are sometimes implicit in the narratives they recounted about the time before their plight, and sometimes explicit in the way they decorated their homes, yet sometimes implied in a sigh or a nostalgic expression on their faces during our talks.

Families and Cultural Traditions in Pre-1975 Vietnam

Vietnamese families and cultural traditions differ from one region to another, especially between the North and the South due to different time frame of historical development. However, in general, Vietnamese society at the beginning of the twentieth century was still based on the traditional conception of family shaped by the influence of Chinese culture. Despite the valiant resistance against Chinese domination for over a thousand years, the Vietnamese dynasties established after the Chinese were driven out adopted many Chinese social, cultural and political institutional forms mainly because the rulers recognized the importance of Confucius teachings in exerting social and political control over their subjects.³⁶ Among the most influential philosophy was the concept of ‘*quân tử*’ - the virtuous man. According to Confucius teaching, a man should value self-improvement, cohesion in the family, law and order in the nation and peace in the world. In that order, to be a man, first, one should constantly refine himself, be the head of the household, obey the law/ social order and contribute to the peace world.

The Confucius concept of ‘the virtuous man’ goes hand in hand with Vietnamese value system which relies on four basic tenets: allegiance to the family, yearning for a good name, love of education, and respect for other people. These tenets are closely interrelated.

What I am presenting in the following pages about Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese family values is by no means applicable to all Vietnamese simply because there are differences between Vietnamese subcultures in different regions which I will be discussing later. However, these are values that most Vietnamese would probably mention if they are asked to say something general or common about our shared culture. More importantly, I chose to focus on these values because they came out of the conversations I had with my informants who were from different regions in Vietnam, who were of different classes and social statuses and who

held very different political views. At the same time, these values are by no means fixed/unchangeable and unique to Vietnamese culture because cultures are constantly in flux and shared.

Allegiance to the family

The most important factor in the value system of the Vietnamese is the family. In contrast to the focus on individualism in the West, the close-knit family is the center of the Vietnamese common man's preoccupation and the backbone of Vietnamese society. By virtue of the principle of collective and mutual responsibility, each individual strives to be the pride of his family.³⁷

Misconduct of an individual is blamed not only on himself, but also on his parents, siblings, relatives, and ancestors. Likewise, any success or fame achieved by an individual brings honor and pride to all members of his family. The Vietnamese child is taught from early childhood to readily forget himself for the sake of his family's welfare and harmony. Central to the concept of family is the obligation of filial piety which is considered the most essential of all virtues in Vietnamese society. The child is expected to be grateful to his parents for the debt of birth, rearing and education, which is reflected in one of the most well-known Vietnamese proverb "*Cong cha nhu nui Thai Son, nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra. Một lòng thờ mẹ kính cha, cho tròn chu hiếu mới là đạo con,*" or "The debt we owe our father is as great as Mount Thai Son; the debt we owe our mother is as inexhaustible as water flowing from its source. We must repay their debt in order to fulfill our obligations as children."³⁸ He is taught to think of his parents and ancestors first, even at his own expense, to make sacrifices for his parents' sake, to love and care for them in their old age. The Vietnamese man who lacks filial piety is looked down upon and ostracized not only by his own family but also by the community.³⁹

The profound love for and attachment to the family is extended to the physical setting in which the family is located: the native village. The dearest wish of the Vietnamese common man is, as a proverb puts it, to die in his own native village and amidst his own folk "as a leaf which leaves the branch to fall down on the ground at the foot of the tree" (*Lá rụng về cội*).⁴⁰ The native village is not only the place where he was born and brought up and where his parents and family live but also a place where his ancestors are buried. Many Vietnamese, especially people in the rural areas, never move out of their native villages or provinces. This deep attachment to the native village explains the lack of horizontal mobility in Vietnamese society back in the days as well as the present days.⁴¹

The family in Vietnam was also an extended one, unlike the typical "nuclear" family in the United States. Traditionally, the Vietnamese family was comprised of three to five generations living under the same roof. Usually it includes parents, children, grandparents and sometimes unmarried uncles and/or aunts. The extended family was considered as a source of mutual support and as institutions where personal and social issues could be resolved. The long history of wars, nevertheless, tampered with the basic structure of the Vietnamese family. Deaths of members in the family made it difficult to maintain the ancient arrangements and practices.⁴²

Concept of 'good name'

The value that the Vietnamese placed on the concept of 'good name,' or more precisely 'fragrant name' (*danh thơm*), cannot be underestimated. To the Vietnamese, a good name is better than any material possession in this world. By securing a good name for him, a man can command respect and admiration from his fellow countrymen. A rich and powerful person with a bad reputation is looked down upon, while a poor man with a good name is very well respected.

It is believed that the best thing that a man can leave behind once he has departed from this world and by which he will be remembered is a good reputation. "After death, a tiger leaves behind his skin, a man his reputation," says a proverb. The desire to have a good name, not only in his life time but also after death, betrays the deep aspiration of the Vietnamese to survive the disintegration of his corporeal frame after death in the memory of his progeny and community.⁴³

A man with a bad name will be disclaimed by his fellow countrymen and become a disgrace to his family. He will lose face, which is a terrible thing in an immobile society where almost everybody knows everybody else in the community. To acquire a good name, a man must avoid all words and actions which damage his dignity and honor. There are three ways by which he can acquire a good name: either by heroic deeds; by intellectual achievements; or by moral virtues. Leading a virtuous life is the easiest and surest path to a good name for there are few opportunities in our everyday life to be heroic and few people are endowed with exceptional intellectual qualities. The virtues most cultivated are the sense of honor, honesty, righteousness, modesty, generosity, and disdain for material gains, virtues most extolled by the Confucian doctrine. In view of the strong solidarity of the Vietnamese family, it is not surprising to know that the Vietnamese strives for a good name not only for himself but also for his parents and children.⁴⁴

Love of education

Vietnamese tradition highly values knowledge and learning; and people have particular respect and admiration for learned individuals. Like the virtuous man, the learned man enjoys great prestige/high status in Vietnamese society. The Vietnamese conceives that knowledge and virtues are but the two complementary aspects of the ideal man. People associated with

knowledge and learning (scholars, writers and teachers) have always been highly respected, not only by the students but also by parents and people from all walks of life.⁴⁵

Learning is considered more valuable than wealth and material success. Rich people who are not educated are often looked down upon by other people and they themselves feel inferior to learned people who are poor. In the traditional social system the scholar ranked first, before the farmer, artisan, and tradesman. Even nowadays, the learned man is held in high esteem and respect. The love of learning does not spring from purely disinterested motives. The lure of prestige and the prospect of improved social status are among the strongest incentives to the pursuit of knowledge. Education represents the essential stepping stones to the social ladder and to good job opportunities. It is the prime force of vertical mobility in Vietnamese society.

Concept of respect

The Vietnamese common man is expected to show respect to people who are senior to him in age, status, or position. At home, he should show respect to his parents, older siblings, and older relatives. This is expressed by obedience in words and action. Respect is part of the concept of filial piety.

Outside the family, respect should be paid to elderly people, teachers, clergymen, supervisors and employers, and people in high positions. Learned and virtuous people enjoy special respect and admiration. But respect is not a one-way behavior. The Vietnamese common man also expects other people to show respect to him, by virtue of his age, status, or position. Special respect is gained by leading a virtuous life, by accomplishing certain heroic deeds or by achieving a high degree of intellectuality.⁴⁶

Respect is expressed by specific behaviors and linguistic devices inherent in the Vietnamese language. It is one of the essential factors in the value system of the Vietnamese people.

Conventional Vietnamese families were thus organized around that principle with the father figure embodying the ultimate power that provides for the family and be completely in charge, and of course to be highly respected.

However, traditional Vietnamese culture is by no means the same for Northerners and Southerners of Vietnam. As observed by William J. Duiker who puts it succinctly,

Regional differences between Northerners and Southerners in Vietnam ran deep and predated the ideological cleavage of the post-1954 period. In the North, where Vietnamese civilization had originated, the vagaries of weather and crowded conditions in the Red River Delta made life a constant challenge, and the influence of tradition was strong. The Southern provinces were absorbed hundreds of years later, after the Vietnamese state conquered the coastal trading of Champa and seized the Mekong Delta from the declining Angkor Empire. Vietnamese settlers moving down from the North found plentiful land and favourable climate, contributing to a more easy-going attitude and a “frontier village” atmosphere.⁴⁷

The differences did make Vietnam seem like two countries culture wise, even to a Vietnamese. The following poem by Tran Thi Nga, a poet who together with Wendy Larsen, published their poems in *Shallow Graves: Two Women and Vietnam* (1960), tells us how the differences were perceived by someone who moved from the North to the South. As a northerner, Tran Thi Nga was very sensitive to the foreignness of Saigon, and her poem are full of references to what it was like to be a stranger in her own country, even before the fall of Saigon. Originally from

Hanoi – north of Vietnam, she and her family had moved to Saigon in the mid-1950s, a few of the one million North Vietnamese who moved south in those years, thinking that once Diem won, they would be able to return home.

Saigon Market

I was scared to go out at first,
even to the market.

We spent the day looking from the window
at people going back and forth.

There were huge Cambodian women
who talked very loud
staring at you from head to toe
as if they would swallow you up.

They spoke Vietnamese,
but we could not understand them.
Their minds had been poisoned against us.
'Why do you come here?' they asked.

'It is too crowded already.
You just want to follow the Westerners
for their bread and butter.'

They recognized us by our voices,
our clothes, and our skin.

When they saw us, they raised their prices
and we did not dare bargain.

One day at the market,
my long ao dai knocked over a woman's lychee basket.
She scolded me until a mob came
and started ripping my dress
calling out, 'Hurt that northerner.
They have come to make us suffer.'
A policeman came.
When they saw he too was from the North,
they yelled, 'Kill him. Kill them both.'
Finally a third came, from the South.
He tried to calm the mob, saying,
'This lady is your countrywoman.'
She had left everything behind.
She suffers too. Please.'
It was a long time before I went back
to the market. When I did,
I always took a southerner with me.
I carried my plastic bag in silence.⁴⁸

At the same time, Vietnamese culture is neither intact nor completely shielded from Western cultures. On the contrary, Asians, particularly Vietnamese, have had generations of contact with France and then America through business, diplomacy, and war. The following description of Saigon, once considered as 'Pearl of the Far East' - the former capital of French

Indo-China and then of South Vietnam, illustrates considerable influences of Western culture on both tangible and intangible aspects of Vietnamese culture,

Saigon, the capital of French Indo-China, is [...] Paris on a smaller scale. The streets and boulevards are broad and immaculate. The public buildings are handsome, dignified structures, standing well back from the thoroughfare, and surrounded by gardens laid out with great taste. There is a miniature Chap Elysees, a miniature Bois de Boulogne, and a miniature Avenue de l'Opera, and each is adorned with statuary such as only French artists can produce. There is, too, a twin-spired cathedral, the Notre Dame of the city, and a beautiful opera house, of which every resident is justly proud. As in Paris, this latter building stands at the head of a grand boulevard in the very heart of the city. On the right is the 'Grand Hotel' – less grand, of course, than its name sake, but still, very good, - while vis-à-vis are the two most popular cafes of the place, - the Café de l'Opera, the Café de la Musique.⁴⁹

Such cultural differences between the North and the South that are discussed above were accentuated during the colonial era, as the French economic presence was significantly stronger in the South, and during the post-Geneva period, when American culture and capitalist practices rapidly permeated the South.

The aforementioned discussion on Vietnamese culture has several implications. First, Vietnamese culture and hence Vietnamese cultural identity embodied by Vietnamese Americans later is by no means homogeneous, rather, it is more diverse, contextual and situational. Second, given the influence of Western cultures, especially American culture on Vietnamese even prior to their arrival in the U.S., I contend that we cannot and should not discuss the immigration of Vietnamese refugees to America and consequently, their assimilation into the dominant

American culture as well their preservation of their traditional value in such as fashion that highlights the linear transformation of cultures. In other words, although migration paths often prompt images of a linear trajectory over time from one location to another, Vietnam should not be treated as “prior” to America on a stage of history or cultural development. All of these implications will be further discussed in the following analysis of my informants’ responses to cultural terrains before and after the fall of Saigon.

Refugees’ recollections

Ned Lukacher has suggested that the dilemma of the postmodern world is ‘to recognize that “mourning is in error” but to be nevertheless condemned to mourn: to be unable to remember the transcendental ground that would once again give meaning to human language and experience but also unable to stop mourning the putative loss of an originary memory and presence that doubles never existed’. The ‘originary memory’ is the quest for the memory of a moment of origin, the Golden Age of the collective past and the time before loss and separation, described by Laura Mulvey as “the pre-Oedipal as Golden Age.”⁵⁰ In the case of members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans, that ‘originary memory’ is the one they have of their families back in Vietnam, the memory of their childhood; the memory of the time before all the disruptions they had to go through – the memory of the time before the fall of Saigon.

My informants in Little Saigon had very conflicting memories about family arrangements and personal power before the Fall of Saigon, their recollections were intertwined with their struggles to negotiate the contemporary constraints in their effort to create new families and exercise with the power that comes with new freedom in America. Their accounts were a very interestingly contradictory mix: they asserted very critical comments on the power hierarchies in

their families but at the same time expressed their longing for the Vietnamese traditional values that highly value order and respect (as in relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children) before the war. Both male and female informants of the two different waves seemed to agree on the family norms, practices, morality and value that existed in Vietnam before 1975. However, informants in the second wave expressed more of an unstable view of the traditional family than those in the first wave who recollected a somewhat more well-established ground of family traditions and values. I also observed that with refugees who were originally from the North of Vietnam but came to the South in the exodus during the late fifties of the twentieth century, family traditions are very distinct in the sense that they are a mixture of both traditional and a somewhat westernized set of values.

In their accounts of the time before the fall of Saigon, family arrangements appeared to denote a hierarchy of power that was willingly accepted by all family members. Over all, the narratives are constructed relying on traditional values on which a typical Vietnamese family was founded which in turn, imply stability and safety that the narrators wanted to emphasize. Mindy Tran, who fled Vietnam for the United States in 1975 just one day after the fall of Saigon remembered about her family back in the days,

My father was a professor of mathematics at the South Vietnam Military Institute. My mom was a housewife. With the salary of my father, we lived very comfortable in a big house in Dalat, it was more like a villa than a normal house, real big. My mom took care of us five children and the only thing we did was to study. All of us wanted to be like my father someday. He is a loving but strict father. We respected him a lot. [...] I still remember whenever we did something wrong, he would have us kneel on a piece of jackfruit skin in a corner. We [the children] never got spanking or anything, but we were

very obedient to him. But don't take me wrong. My father was very sweet to us. You know, we are Catholics, and our home was run with love, not disciplines [in the Vietnamese version, the informant used the word *roi vọt* which means cane or rod].

In Mindy's memory, her father was the 'pillar' of the house and also the pillar of her narrative. He was the breadwinner, the educator and the protector of everyone in her family. He was a good example to look up to and respect not only because he is the father but also because of his achievement. Her father is also the source of pride of her whole family. Mindy, however, also asserted that her father did not abuse that power despite the submission of both this wife and children to him. In her opinion, the fact that her family are Catholic has a lot to do with the loving nature of their relationship.

A conversation with a Mr. Nguyen reinforced what other informants told me about the family arrangements that prioritized men's mobility and power,

My father was a businessman who also worked on a ship. He had business friends who asked him to sell their good for them. Thus, he earned a profit by taking goods from the village to the city and selling them there at higher prices. With the profit he made, he bought goods in the city and sold them in the village, also for a profit. While my father was away doing business, my mother took care of us children and did some trading in the village herself. We children had no responsibilities except to have fun. The village was like a big family because we knew everyone who lived there. There were rocks, sand, and water at the back of my house and people, young and old, swam there. Overall, my life in the village was good. And we were like a lot of other families in our village.

Memories like these suggest that Vietnamese society, both in rural and urban areas, placed a higher value on men than on women and males and females in the old Vietnam occupied two

totally different spheres, public versus domestic. Moreover, the authority structure between husband and wife was reinforced by the parents' overwhelming power over children. Children were expected to be respectful; they were not supposed to "talk back." Parents could discipline their children the way they saw fit. In most cases, it was the father who had the decision of how to discipline a child, and the mother had no right to intervene. Children were supposed to accept whatever form of disciplines towards them without resistance to show their obedience to their parents.

Growing up in Hue, one of the most ancient cities of Vietnam, I personally observe these patterns myself. Much as my father wants to build a more 'democratic' environment in my family, he has always been considered as the most powerful figure in the house. Until today, we - his five children- have never questioned his authority. Although my mother did go to work as an accountant for an import/export company, she was the only person who took care of the household chores because my father never laid his fingers on any of the work around the house. He was "the face of the family," to use my mother's words; my family's figure in the public sphere. I and my siblings have a more bonding relationship with my mother and tend to keep a distance to my father for fear of upsetting him. Spanking has never been a form of discipline in my family – although it was pretty popular where I am from during those days, we children still have an undefinable fear combined with respect towards my father. Sometimes, just a solemn expression on his face was enough to make us behave and be quiet. This still stays true until this day.

At the same time, my informants' responses suggested the influence of Western culture on a lot of Vietnamese families. Mindy Tran's suggestion of Catholicism on shaping the loving relationship between her father and his children to me was an indication of how Western view

(read American) on parents and children relationship gradually shaped Vietnamese families, especially those from the higher social classes and the elite, most of whom were converted into Catholics and had been exposed to American culture.⁵¹

However, such influence did not wash away other aspects of the Vietnamese family values such as the allegiance to their extended families which is elegantly captured in the proverb “*Một giọt máu dù đi đến đâu vẫn còn về quê*” (Blood is thicker than water).

We had a second house on the base where my father worked. Every weekend, he would take the whole family down there for fun. We would go to the beach, eat seafood and hang out with my uncle’s family. Sometimes, my grandparents would join. I loved it when we got together as one big family.

In a lot of interviews with my informants, a lot of times the term *family* was used to refer to both their immediate and extended family. Many did not forget to comment on how their extended families always have their backs in the vicissitudes of their lives.

Refugees of the second wave, however, generally recounted somewhat less stable family situations. Perhaps, their memories are colored by a more intensive dislocations and resettlement experience both in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and the United States. Vo Dang, a Vietnamese restaurant owner recounted,

My family had four boys and one girl. My mom was with us and my Dad was in the South Vietnamese Navy in Danang. Then my Dad was transferred to Saigon, but my mom, my brother, and I stayed in Danang until my father found a place in Saigon. Soon the three of us rode a helicopter to Saigon and moved into my father’s house on Cuu Long Base. My dad built that house on the base and tried to do everything for my family, and my mom, was a real good mother – until she left in 1973.

In Vo's account, his mother left because of his father's constant absences from home and because of his family's unstable condition of accommodation. His father was a soldier in the South Vietnam Army and had to move whenever his duty called, thus the rupture in the family. Vo's story reinforces my discussion on how patriarchal Vietnamese culture is in general despite the lower social status of his family.

Tina Nguyen, who owns a hairdresser's in Little Saigon recounts an even gloomier picture of her family and her childhood, a family already fractured and a childhood already sullied and stained by wars. She recalled,

For more than twenty years, my mother never had a quiet night; she knew nothing but the sound of artillery shells as lullabies to put her babies to sleep. Children grow up learning to hate, to fight, to kill. There was nothing but war. Every time the word 'peace' was mentioned, there would suddenly be an emptiness, a loss of purpose and direction ... [even though] we were sick and tired of a war that was thirty years long, a war that took away our loved ones, our hearts, our feelings, and destroyed everything we had ever lived or worked for....

These findings point to very different views on the families and values among Vietnamese people before the end of Vietnam War, but overall, with the father figure as the arch of the narratives, my informants shared the idea that patriarchal values were dominant in Vietnamese culture despite Western influences in many other aspects of family relations. In such a traditional family, children were expected to be obedient, studious and respectful in other social relations; and order, stability and perhaps safety were secured.

The fall of Saigon

The fall of Saigon means different things to South Vietnamese refugees. For some, it is just a temporary loss of South Vietnam as a country and as a political regime. Indeed, among the 125,000 people who departed right before and after the Fall of Saigon, many wanted to believe that it was just a temporary departure, and that they would go back and rebuild South Vietnam; and those beliefs are still intact until today after more than thirty years. For some, it is the end of a righteous or meaningless war they fought and the beginning of a different chapter in their lives. But what does it mean to members of the 1.5 generation who were literally children and teenagers when the event happened? What do they make of the moment when they left Vietnam behind in chaos? What image of Vietnam did they bring along with them? How do that moment and image affect the way they identify themselves in the future? What about the people who got stuck behind? What does the Fall of Saigon mean to them?

Carolyn Hoang was twelve years old when she left Saigon on one of the ships of the American fleet where her Dad worked as the Commander on April 30, 1975. She remembered, I just got back from school and still had my uniform on, when I saw my Dad running through our main door shouting, “Get ready and be quick. We’ve got to go, now. Grab anything you need and just be ready.” By the expression on his face, I knew I shouldn’t ask any question or say anything. I just did what he said. I took my uniform and my diary with me while my Mom was packing other things for everyone else, and we left our home about two hours later. It was dark when we boarded the ship, and when we were about half a mile away from the shore of Saigon river I saw a huge fire from afar toward the direction of the city. Apparently a bomb came off. It was eerily beautiful, I hate to say this, but it really was. [...] I realized I might never get to see my house again. It’s like they are [sic] all swallowed in that humongous flame. I was paralyzed ... [silence]

mesmerized. I thought I was in a trance and for a moment. I really couldn't make sense of what was happening. I don't know where we were heading to.

Like a lot of others who left Vietnam right after the end of the war, most of whom were affiliated with high-ranking officers who worked for the South Vietnam government, Carolyn Hoang was lucky enough to be on the ship with all her family members. Although she was terrified and was in shock by the event, she did not mention any other major disruptions. She has eight siblings who are now living all over the States, but they stay very close together. Hoang suggested that the fall of Saigon made her and perhaps her siblings aware of the importance of being together as a family because "it is the family that held [them] together when [they] arrived in the U.S."

Similarly, Henry Nguyen, a real estate agent in Garden Grove, who left Vietnam in one of those planes sent by the U.S. government and whose father was a translator for the South Vietnam government, told me about the evacuation of his family,

My father had some connections with some high-ranking officers and we knew that the Americans were pulling out. We actually were prepared for the event. Later I knew that my parents were able to sell a lot of their property before we left. [...] The day we left Vietnam, it was very chaotic. We arrived at the U.S. Embassy [in Saigon] and saw a sea of people outside. A lot of them were trying to climb the wall to get into the building. I don't quite remember what happened next. All I recall was we did boldly pushed the barbed wire, fought through crowds, slipped through a hidden door, and ran up the ladder to the roof where the [sic] helicopter was waiting for us. [...] I had no idea how long it had been since the helicopter had lifted off from the embassy rooftop in Saigon. But time didn't matter. The only thing mattered was that we [his whole family] were finally safe in the reassuring hands of the Americans.

Several conversations with other informants who comprised the first wave of Vietnamese refugees reinforced what Hoang and Nguyen indicated. Although some did talk about incidents in which they had to flee the country without some of their family members due to many circumstances such as getting lost in the crowd, being late, refusing to go...., many of them reunited with their family members very soon after that.

When I pushed a little bit harder and asked them about their political views on the fall of Saigon, I got very different responses. Some of them stated that they were either too young to know anything about that or refused to have any comments on the topic.⁵² A few of them, however, expressed antipathy towards Communism claiming that without the regime, they would not have fled Vietnam and started their lives all over again in a new land. Some others talked about how they were told by their parents later that they felt betrayed by the U.S. government because the U.S. did not continue to help South Vietnam to fight the war until the end.

Compared to the people who did not evacuate Vietnam in 1975 and stayed behind under the Communist regime with their families, people in the first wave did not experience drastic changes until they became refugees heading to the United States and when many of them had to move from place to place to finally settle down and adapt to the new culture, something I will be discussing in later chapters.

Fall of Saigon and its aftermath in South Vietnam – A Revolutionary Government and its New Population

For those who got stuck behind, perhaps the Fall of Saigon means the end of freedom and the beginning of torture and hardship and above all, a rupture and drastic changes in every way of their life. In other words, it was the beginning of a segment of life when their previous cultural

values and practices were critically challenged. In particular, most of my informants talked about fracture of family structure, reversal of gender roles, downward mobility and lack of education and respect.

After taking over the South, determined to consolidate their political power, the communist rulers in Hanoi made a concerted effort to keep those who had supported the old regime in South Vietnam from challenging their authority. In general, “revolutionary rule had been established with little evidence of widespread bloodshed, unlike what had been expected by Southern Vietnamese.”⁵³ The victorious communist hastily rounded up several hundred thousand army officers and government officials in the defeated south and confined them in reeducation camps where they were forced to confess to past crimes and to promise to abide by communist doctrines in the future. These political prisoners remained incarcerated for weeks or years depending on their rank or importance in the vanquished South Vietnamese government, and upon their release many were placed under constant surveillance and prevented from getting good jobs.⁵⁴

Tuan Nguyen was seven years old when South Vietnam was taken over by the Communists. His father, like most people who worked for the South Vietnam government immediately presented himself to the Communists to “avoid later problems.” He recalled,

Because my father had been a second lieutenant in the army, they [the Communists] put him in jail and moved him about five or six times to different camps. In these camps, they would make my father come to class, where they talked horrible things about America and South Vietnam. He was in those camps for over three years. Once he got out, he could not do anything. Every week, he had to go to the local government and report what he did and where he went during the week. The government controlled everything. My

father couldn't work for any company because he had been in the South Vietnamese Army. Even worse, I and my brother lived with my mother in Camau and my father lived alone in Saigon. He wanted to live with us, but the government wouldn't let him.

Sometimes, my mother and I would come to Saigon to see him, but mostly, we lived in two separate cities. I really missed him, I prayed for him every night.

Situation like that of Tuan's family is pretty typical for those who used to work for the Southern government. Families are fractured often due to the absence of the father figure, and the geographical separation of family members due to financial burden once the father – in most cases the bread winner – was absent from the family picture. Anh Tran, another informant, told me about how her seven other siblings were sent to her aunts and uncles in different provinces in Vietnam because her mother could not support them all while her father was away. She spent almost half of her childhood without much contact with her brothers and sisters; which made her feel “awkward when [she] saw them again in [her] family's reunification before coming to the United States.” This was a very common practice among families whose members I interviewed. Unable to financially support their families, women often resorted to sending their children to relative members who were not involved in the old government (most of whom were in the countryside) for contemporary care and waited for the reunion later once things were settled. Some people whom I interviewed even talked about how they were born and grew up without knowing their fathers or their existence. Hao Truong, a stay-home-mom in Little Saigon recalled,

I don't remember much what happened before I was around six years old. What I remember most is that a man had just come back to where we lived in Saigon. He had all this beard. And he looked kinda [sic] dirty. And this man just grabbed me and kissed me. I was like, “Who is this man?” When my grandmother and my mom came out and started

hugging him, I learned that he was my father. Because he had been in the South Vietnamese Army, he had been in a reeducation camp since I was born.

The lack of the father figure in the family also resulted in the reversal of gender roles and child labor which made it a lot more difficult for women and children. All of a sudden, women became breadwinner, supporter, and nurturer. At the same time, children became helpers in supporting the families. Mindy Truong, who I mentioned earlier recalled,

Since my father was away, my mother was to take care of the five of us. She would make glutinous rice and other kinds of Vietnamese delicacies, push a cart with the food around and sell them for very little money to get us by. I was ten years old then, and I helped her make the food to sell. There was nothing else we could do and all of a sudden we were food vendors on the street. [She smiled ironically]. It was hard, especially for my mother who was not used to any of these; but, in a way, it was fun to me. I realized I could be her helper, you know? I was quite proud of myself.

When I was conducting this interview with Truong at her home in Westminster, her mother was moving to and fro between the living room where we were talking and the kitchen where she was cooking lunch. She would join us for a few minutes and would go back to the kitchen to check on the food. At one point in our conversation, she talked about how she felt bad for her children and felt “guilty” as a mother because she could not do everything by herself so that her children could just concentrate on their study. Most of my informants recalled similar experience in which their lives were turned upside down when women took care of the families’ financial burdens leaving children without care most of the time. My husband’s family was in a similar situation after the fall of Saigon. His father was sent to the reeducation camp, leaving his mother pregnant with her third child. From being the wife of a professor in a university who lead a very

comfortable life, she was left with two children and one more in her womb without anyone else to rely on financially. She resorted to doing anything people around her suggested. She sold cigarettes, lottery tickets and made conical hats. At one point, she even went to other provinces to trade rice with other vendors and often times she was cheated by her fellow vendors. My husband and his elder brother, then six and ten, helped their mother take care of the newborn brother and did chores around the house. My husband would tell me stories about him being a loner, taking care of himself since his parents were away.

Downward mobility, lack of education, and moral decadence

In their narratives, many of my interviewees focus on their downward mobility, lack of education and moral decadence in their lives under the communist regime. The fonder memories before the fall of Saigon were gradually replaced by more pessimistic ones. In their stories, the new economic situation not only changed the gender roles in Vietnamese families, but also their social status, or the good name of the family and each individual. The absence of the father, as discussed above, resulted in financial instability and lack of education for young children. Hung Tran, a boat person who came to the United States during the late 1970s recalled,

My father was sent to the reeducation camp, and my mother became ill two years after that. She couldn't make it and passed away. [silence]. And all of a sudden, we were orphans. You know, our father was still alive, but he was not there with us. Nobody took care of us. We eventually became beggars and dumpster divers. We even looted other people's houses, those who left their property behind to run for their freedom. I remember one time all the three of us broke into this house thinking nobody was there. We climbed this high gate and jumped in and to our surprise we were greeted by a

German shepherd, apparently left behind and hungry. I got bitten badly since I was trying to protect my brothers. I felt like my life then was even worse than [that of] a dog.

In Vietnamese culture, using the metaphor of a dog to talk about one's life is seen as the lowest degree of humiliation. Hung Tran's story is not unusual among my informants. While many families managed to survive, many surrendered the circumstances and resorted to what was once considered as bad and unethical according to Vietnamese culture such as begging, stealing, and looting. Even those who survived, no matter how hard they tried, downward mobility was inevitable due to the stigma they got for their connection with the former South Vietnam government. When asked about what was done to overcome that difficult time, Tran replied with a hint of bitterness,

We worked very hard just to get enough food. But no matter how hard a person worked, it wasn't always possible to get an education in Vietnam, especially if your father had served with the Americans. Most people just went to school through the sixth or seventh grade, just enough to learn to read and write a little and do simple math. It was especially hard to get from the ninth grade to the tenth. You had to take a very difficult test. Even if you passed the test, it was still extremely difficult to get from the twelfth grade to college. You either had to be a child of the C.V. [Viet Cong] to get in, or you had to be extremely smart. Even if you go to college, studied hard, and graduated, you might still wind up sitting on the street selling cologne, cigarettes, and vegetables forever.

As mentioned earlier, family name and education has a very strong connection in Vietnamese culture. However, most of my informants recalled lack of opportunity for education for several reasons like those mentioned by Tran above. Besides, the fact that a lot of children helped with

the family financial burdens as well as their experience of unstable accommodation condition also contributed to their lack of education.

For those who were lucky to continue school, the new and different system of education imposed by the Communist government posed a lot of issues. The new regime moved expeditiously to eliminate or at least reduce the so-called “poisonous weeds” of Western bourgeois culture and plant “the seeds of a new and beautiful socialist culture.” Books reflecting Western influence were removed from bookstores and libraries. The playing of the most “obnoxious” forms of Western music, such as rock and roll, was banned. According to one report, Saigon radio stations, now under Party (The Communist Party) control, were permitted to play Western music for only two hours each day, and the beat and the lyrics were toned down. The key vehicle for controlling behavior and transmitting cultural values to the young, of course, was education. For a brief period, the entire school system was shut down, and teachers were given re-indoctrination courses before being certified to teach under the new regime. When the school reopened, students were issued new textbooks hurriedly sent from the North to replace existing ones, which were withdrawn from circulation. A new curriculum was instituted based on the system in use in the North.⁵⁵ In one of the interviews with Mindy Truong, whose father was a university professor, she asked me if I knew a poem entitled *Qua Đèo Ngang* (Going by Ngang Pass) that she used to learn from school before the fall of Saigon.⁵⁶ To her surprise, I cited it, which put tears in her eyes. She asked me why I knew the poem, and told me that after the Communist took over, the poem was not the textbook anymore and she thought I would not know it since I grew up in Vietnam during the eighties. When I told her that my parents taught me the poem and that my grandfather hid a lot of old books after the Communists took over just for the sake of his love for books, with a sigh with relief, she said, “You are lucky!”⁵⁷ Many of

my informants express their antipathy towards this new system of education, claiming that a lot of what they had to study was about how great Communism was. Interestingly, the theme of education and curriculum would come up again later when they talked about their school experience in the U.S., something I will discuss in chapter 2.

Besides, everyday activities at schools were also changed to make sure that children were indoctrinated and changed their old ways of carrying themselves at schools. Tu Nguyen recounted those days at school under the communist regime when she had to wear a red handkerchief with despise,

As a child in post-1975 Vietnam, I particularly disliked one thing. To enter school every day, you had to wear a red handkerchief that stood for your loyalty to the Communist government. If you didn't wear it, you couldn't go to school. None of us wanted to wear the silly thing, and we often asked each other, "What is this for?" But we had to wear it. Some would just put it on their neck to get to the school, and once they were in, they would take it off. Whenever they saw a teacher, they put it back on. We all made fun of it.

This story strikes me as very interesting since it embodies a recurring motif – a growing-up-under-the-communist-regime childhood story of rebelling that also appeared in many other narratives I collected. Nguyen's is a tale of youthful escapade during those years of living in a different political regime: you haven't been a child of former Southern Vietnamese under communism in Vietnam unless you have taken off the red handkerchief or done something mischievous behind the teacher's back at least once. On the other hand, Nguyen's story prepares her future awareness of injustice which, at this stage, is still implicit. However, she places the habit of taking off the red handkerchief in a broader context of ideology clash symbolized by her

topography making a statement about the rebel against the communist regime and its ideology by children of the followers of the former South Vietnam government.

Tu also recalls the post-war tension between communist and anti-communist ideologies in the Saigon school she attended. Tu received mixed teachings from the government monitored school which attempted to indoctrinate her and the other students with Vietnamese communist beliefs and from her parents at home who conveyed their negative experiences with communist oppression. Tu spent many years internalizing her school teachings about the strengths of Vietnamese communist ideologies. In addition, she engaged in this process while struggling to reconcile these teachings with the horror stories of the corruption within Vietnam's officials and the atrocities committed by the Vietnamese communist government. She recalls memories of the fact that both she and her parents had to keep their anti-communist rhetoric silent in public while confining these discussions within the home. Tu represents one perspective of 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans who came at a later age and possesses a large body of memories and experiences in Vietnam; she did not leave Vietnam until the age of thirteen

Tu Nguyen's story also has several implications for me. For one thing, it shows how strategic these children were in dealing with the new but somewhat troublesome culture at school. At the same time, it indicates a somewhat disturbing reality that most of my informants agreed: that of moral/respect decadence. In Vietnamese tradition, because of the love for education, teachers are supposed to be very well-respected and students are supposed to obey teachers, a principle that is thoroughly implied in the social ranking: king, master (read teacher) and father. In this case, although it was a children's 'game', and one might argue that those students did obey the teachers (they put the scarves on in front of the teachers), the incident, however, shows that there was decadence in morality and ethics. Many of my informants also

recounted experiences in which the concept of respect in social relation was in jeopardy. Mindy Truong told me about the time her family had to seek accommodation from a relative because their house in Dalat was confiscated. She said,

The first year after my father was put into the education camp, because our house was confiscated by the Vietcong, we had to seek shelter from my mother's relative in Dalat. They had a pretty big house, but we had to all scrambled in a tiny little room, the five of us and my mother. We slept on the floor and it was really bad. Every morning, when my cousins cleaned the house, they used a broom and swept the dust onto our faces. I had never felt that humiliated before, but I did not say a word. I knew we did not have a choice. However, whenever my father asked about us, my mother would lie to him and would say we were doing fine [smiled bitterly].

What bothered Truong was that before the fall of Saigon, her relatives had always treated her family really well and she considered them as very close. She expresses her disdain for such a change in their behavior and felt bad that her family was treated in such a way by her very relatives. While some people could rely on extended family members, some did experience estrangement/indifference and even exploitation from people in their family. Vo Dang, the owner of a restaurant I mentioned earlier recalled,

My uncle lived in a New Economic Zone called Duong Minh Chau. It was much better than the New Economic Zone we had been near Bien-Hoa. My uncle had a farm, but he didn't know how to work it. He wanted us to be his workers. I knew how to do everything, and I worked. [...] My uncle had a wife and four children, but he didn't take care of them. I was taking care of my family and his family too. He didn't help me at all. Sometimes I was very tired of him and of the work. Eventually my uncle wrote a letter do

my daddy. He told my daddy that he was taking care of my family and wanted my daddy to send him for taking care of us. My daddy sent him about \$500, and my uncle spent it all. I was so sick of the way he acted, but I did not know what to do.

In Dang's situation, his father had made it to the United States thanks to the help of his aunt although it was more like a deal than help (his father had to take his aunt's children with him on the boat provided by his sister instead of his own). Thinking Dang's father would send him a lot of money, his uncle became very exploiting since he wanted the money. Dang later told me that his father did send him a lot of money in preparation for his escape out of Vietnam, but he always had to pretend to be poor by "dressing in shabby clothes and ate very little" for fear of making his uncle and people around him suspicious. When his uncle finally found out the truth, he even threatened Dang to report the police unless Dang gave him the money he wanted. Dang confided that he felt betrayed by his very uncle and that hurt him more than anything.

My informants also talked about how, due to the need of survival, tortures were ignored, betrayals became normal and corruptions were accepted. In other words, for South Vietnamese who remained under Vietcong regime after the fall of Saigon, the domination of the Communists shattered any sense of security and respect in social relations, even within the family. The high degree of desperation, suspicion, incidence of betrayals, corruption and other reversals attenuated cultural norms. In the midst of extremity of daily survivals, people depended on subterfuge, disguise, lying and silence.

Economic struggle

Apart from the changes in cultural and social norms, my informants also talked about the economic struggles that their families had to go through. That seemingly never ending battle to

support their families coupled with the lack of freedom became the last drop that spilled the water and made them plot the plans to leave the country by any means. Along with the many plans to ‘educate’ and indoctrinate Southerners, both adults and children, northern cadre stationed in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) tried to wipe out every aspect of capitalism that had “contaminated” the local population especially in the economy. According to Duiker,

[t]he first cautious moves to establish control over the urban economy in the South were taken almost immediately after the establishment of revolutionary rule. All property owned by the Government of South Vietnam was confiscated, and private banks and a number of enterprise belonging to foreign capitalist were seized. In order to reduce the power of major industrialists and traders, the government [communist] launched a campaign to confiscate the property of the so-called comprador bourgeoisie (describe in one article as bankers, war contractors, ex-imperialists, investors, and speculators).

Contending that these elements were guilty of speculation, hoarding, and related efforts to sabotage the efficient functioning of the market, the government moved quickly to eliminate them by seizing their businesses and confiscating property in a campaign described in the leading Saigon newspaper as “difficult, violent, and extremely complex.” Several individual entrepreneurs, described as “the pharmaceutical king” or “the barbed wired king” were placed on trial and charged with serious crimes against the people.⁵⁸

Van Nguyen, a registered nurse at X Hospital, Orange County, California came to the United States with her entire family as boat people in 1983. She remembered,

[...] we didn’t have much freedom in our country. Government officials often came to our house to find out who was home. People did not have the right to do as many things as you do over here. For example, if you had a lot of money, opened a store, and started

to make a lot of profit, a government official could take your store all of a sudden. You could lose everything you invested in it, you know, money, effort, everything. This is what the Communist did when they took over South Vietnam; that's what they did to everybody. Rich people, prosperous people – all became poor. Even when they still had a lot of money because they managed to hide it, they had to pretend to be poor; otherwise, they [the Communist] would not leave you alone.

Nguyen's parents owned a chicken farm in Song Cau, a province in the South of Vietnam and were doing pretty well even after the war. However, at one point, according to Nguyen, the Communist just came and took it over claiming that the farm was too big for just one family to run. From being able to support themselves, they were left with nothing in their hands. Her mother finally went back to her village and worked on her little farm, growing rice. Her father who was a soldier of the South Vietnam Army became a driver after getting back from the reeducation camp. Nguyen told me that with a family of ten people – she has seven siblings- what came out of the small paddy of rice that her mom and her children were working on and the money her father made with the cyclo was hardly enough for them to eat. She added, “[w]e lived from hand to mouth, and still, we were hungry all the time.”

Besides the renovation in the urban economy system, a key element in their drive to dismantle capitalism of the south, bureaucrats in Hanoi adopted a Soviet model of centralized planning and imposed their economic doctrines throughout the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. By designating uncultivated areas, usually in mountainous and remote areas – the government intended to achieve a two-folded plan: to speed up the stricken economy of post-war Vietnam and to punish people who worked for the South Vietnam government. Their plans failed miserably due to different factors. For example, the government paid factory managers according

to how many workers they employed in place of how many goods they turned out. As a result, business efficiency declined abruptly, and industrial production remained stagnant. The decision to collectivize agriculture had equally dismal consequences. Peasants dragged their feet when communist administrators ordered them to take unreasonable actions, such as grow coffee instead of tea on land that was not suitable for coffee production. Peasants also lost incentive to exert themselves when they were forced to work on collectivized rice plantations in the Mekong delta and elsewhere. As agricultural production failed to keep pace with population growth in the South, the government had to resort to rationing food and importing rice to prevent widespread starvation.⁵⁹

Ai Van Nguyen, a hairdresser in Garden Grove, came to the U.S. in 1985. Her family was among those sent to the New Economic Zone to live and work recalled,

[w]e lived in the New Economic Zone with my father and went to school there. [...]

After school, I would cut trees with my second brother and tried to help my father. We cleaned the yard, cut bamboo down, and planted sweet potatoes and corn, but still we did not have enough to eat. Sometimes, we would be so hungry that we would cut bamboo and boil the inside to eat. At times, we thought we would die. Our skin was so pale because of malnutrition. One time, I saw my father crawl on the floor and curl up like he was going to die.

Nguyen's family situation was not an exception in the New Economic Zone as can be seen in many other narratives that I collected. Due to the inefficiency of the management and measures taken by new government, people suffered from starvation and malnutrition, especially children. In fact, Nguyen later told me that one of her sister died before they left for America because she was ill and too weak and they did not have enough money to put her in a hospital. Her father, in

desperation, was planning to poison the whole family and would commit suicide; but they survived thanks to what Nguyen called “a miracle,” a considerable amount of money sent to her family from her aunt in America, enough to get themselves a boat and plot a plan to flee Vietnam amid the abject miseries that they themselves and many others were going through.

In conclusion, the fall of Saigon sent the first wave of Vietnamese refugees to many different camps and finally America with them not knowing what to expect and being unsure about their future. It left behind a devastated people whose lives were shattered in every way. Families without fathers, women without support, children without care, social relations without respect, and a people without trust and hope for a better life in the future are recurring themes that I found in their narratives. In the midst of the extremity of daily survival and sometimes of life-and-death choices, people had to break cultural norms and resorted to a dangerous escape to change their destinies. From what I learned through my informants’ narratives of their struggles as well as their families’, choosing hardships, struggles and disruption of cultural norms under the communist regime to remember and recount them is a strategic move to prepare for their escape out of Vietnam and ultimately their survival.

¹ To protect the privacy of the informants, I have used pseudonyms for all personal names in this project, except when stated otherwise.

²<http://www.city-data.com/city/Garden-Grove-California.html>.

³ Interview with Van Nguyen, June 15th, 2011.

⁴ The second wave of Vietnamese refugees to the USA is referred to as boat people because the major means of transportation they used to escape out of Vietnam was small fishing boats.

⁵ According to the U.S., Congress, Senate, among the countries that Indochinese Refugees seek shelter include United States, France, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, West Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom, Denmark, Austria, Italy, Norway, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Netherlands, Philippines, Switzerland, Israel, and others. (quoted in Darrel Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1979).

⁶ 2011 US Census Bureau, American Community Survey

⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds : Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1993). p.12.

⁸ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture " in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe: The School of American Research Press, 1991). pp.147-48.

⁹Ibid. p.147.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press 1994).

¹³Ibid. p.11

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Min and Carl Bankston Zhou, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

¹⁷K. Liebkind, "Ethnic identity: Challenging the Boundaries of Social Psychology," in *Social psychology of identity and the self-concept*, ed. G. Breakwell (London: Academic, 1992).

¹⁸Mary Yu Danico, *The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawai'i*. (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004). p.55.

¹⁹ Please see Nagel, 1994; Okamura 1994; Mitchell 1974 for more details.

²⁰Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture," *Social Problems* 44, no. 1, Special Issue on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America (Feb.,1994). p.158.

²¹ See, for example, Nazli Kibrai, *Family Tighrope: Vietnamese in Philadelphia* (Berkeley

University of California Press, 1993)., Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 generation : stories of war, revolution, flight, and new beginnings*, Asian American history and culture (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006).

²² See, for instance, Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); *Mistrusting Refugees*, ed. E. Valentine Daniel and John C. Knudsen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).; and Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, ed. Ronald H. Bayor, The New Immigrants Series (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999).

²³ Vietnamese American writers of 1.5 generation adopt the form of life narrative as a site in which they can both narrate the incidents of their life and represent their identity at the same time. These memoirs, an overarching term for "writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject," "include many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography" (Smith and Watson, 2001 *Mistrusting Refugees.*, 5). The plot they employ usually involves a young boy or a young girl along with his/her family (sometimes just the mother or the father, or even grandparents) leaving Vietnam after the war. They would be bound for America, and once settled in, would have to deal with issues that typify the immigrant experience. Examples of this literary genre by Vietnamese American writers are Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, Quang X. Pham's acclaimed father-son memoir *A Sense of Duty*, Andrew Lam's PEN Award-winning *Perfume Dreams*, or Aimee Phan's debut collection of short stories *We Should Never Meet*. Recent years (2001- present) have also seen a considerable number of life narratives that tackle similar issues in the adapting process and the effort to represent identity of this generation. Examples include *The Unwanted* by Nguyen Kien (2001), *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by le thi diem thuy (2003), *Song of Saigon* by Anh Vu Sawyer (2003), *SaiGon to San Diego: Memoir of a Boy Who Escaped from Communist Vietnam* by Trinh Quang Do, or *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007) by Bich Minh Nguyen.

²⁴ See Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and the New America* (London: University of California Press, 2003).

²⁵Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

²⁸Nazli Kibria, *Family Tighrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁹Huynh Dinh Te, *Introduction to Vietnamese Culture* (San Diego: Multifunctional Resource Center, San Diego State University, 1987).

³⁰ The Geneva Agreements of 1954 ended the eight-year struggle by the French to reassert their colonial rule in Vietnam. With these agreements, Vietnam had won her independence but lost her unity.

³¹ U.S., Congress, Senate, 1955. Quoted in Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States*.

³²Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Praeger, 1968).

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- ³³Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States*.
- ³⁴Chester A. Bain, *Vietnam: The Roots of Conflicts* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967).
- ³⁵Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States*.
- ³⁶Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 generation : Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*.
- ³⁷Khac Kham Nguyen and Yunesuko Higashi Ajia Bunka Kenkyu Senta (Tokyo Japan), *An Introduction to Vietnamese culture*, East Asian cultural studies series, (Tokyo,; Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, 1967).
- ³⁸Huynh Dinh Te, *Selected Vietnamese Proverbs* (Oakland, California: Center For International Communication and Development, 1990).
- ³⁹Dinh Hoa Nguyen, *Some Aspects of Vietnamese Culture : four lectures*, Monograph series / Center for Vietnamese Studies, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (Carbondale, Ill.: Center for Vietnamese Studies, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1972).
- ⁴⁰Te, *Selected Vietnamese Proverbs*.
- ⁴¹Nguyen and Yunesuko Higashi Ajia Bunka Kenkyu Senta (Tokyo Japan), *An introduction to Vietnamese Culture*.
- ⁴²Te, *Introduction to Vietnamese Culture*.
- ⁴³Nguyen and Yunesuko Higashi Ajia Bunka Kenkyu Senta (Tokyo Japan), *An introduction to Vietnamese Culture*.
- ⁴⁴Ibid.
- ⁴⁵Ibid.
- ⁴⁶Te, *Introduction to Vietnamese Culture*.
- ⁴⁷William J. Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon*, ed. Gillian Berchowitz, Monographs in International Studies (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989).
- ⁴⁸Tran Thi Nga, "Saigon Market," in *Saigon, Mistress of the Mekong*, ed. Anastasia Edwards (Hongkong: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ⁴⁹Jasper Whiting, "Cafe Society," in *Saigon - Mistress of the Mekong*, ed. Anastasia Edwards (Hongkong: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ⁵⁰Laura Mulvey, "Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience," *History Workshop Journal* no. 23 (1987).
- ⁵¹ A lot of my informants tend to equate Catholicism with Western culture/values.
- ⁵² Initially, I did not intend to ask my informants to comment on any political issues. However, in conversations with people who came in the second waves, those issues often came up very often without probing from my part. I then tried to bring this up in interviews with people in the first wave. The findings from these interviews (with people from both the first and the second wave) made me question about suggestions proposed by some previous studies on Vietnamese Americans (see, for example, Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. and XuanTruong Thi Nguyen, "Vietnamese American identities: How race, gender, and class are reflected in cultural, language, and technological barriers" (Washington State University, 2011). Basically these studies treat the first wave as comprised of refugees who identify themselves as political refugees and the second wave were made up with people who fled Vietnam for economic reasons.
- ⁵³Patrick J. Hearden, *The Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Longman, 2005).p.30.
- ⁵⁴Ibid.
- ⁵⁵Hoang Ngoc, "General Education in South Vietnam," *Hoc Tap (Study)* (December 1976).
- ⁵⁶ This is a very popular poem by a famous female poet during the 19th century in Vietnam. The poem is about her nostalgia for a lost dynasty. My informant asked about this poem because she was talking about South Vietnam as a lost country and implicitly compared herself to the poet.
- ⁵⁷ I did not ask her why she thought I was lucky, but I guess in her opinion, the education system of South Vietnam was much better than the new system imposed by the Communist government after the war, and the fact that I got exposed to a lot of literature that she used to study made me lucky.
- ⁵⁸Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon*.
- ⁵⁹Hearden, *The Tragedy of Vietnam*.

Chapter 2: A New Journey, a New Homeland for the Uprooted: Tales of The Survivors

Hát cho người vượt biển

Này đoàn người đang vượt biển Đông
Bé li ti như chiếc lá trong rừng
Người liều mạng đang vượt trùng dương
Như hạt cát giữa sa mạc nóng
Đoàn người hung đang vượt biển Đông
Mũi kim khâu ở đồng rom khô
Này đoàn người đi tìm tự do
Muốn tìm người, thật là khó
Lạy Trời Phật, cúi đầu mà coi
Bé ngây thơ trong bão toại bởi
Lạy Trời Phật, xin nhìn ngoài khơi
Ông bà lão nghiêng răng cầm lái
Và còn lạy xin Ngài Thần Biển
Đoái thương đôi trẻ mới se duyên
Lạy loàn gười, tôi lạy tổ tiên
Hãy cho tôi thấy đất liền
Này đoàn người đang ở trùng dương
Phật rất thương người
Nhưng Phật Trời đang ở ngôi cao
Trên đất liền chỉ có loài người...

An Ode for the Boat People
Hey, the people trying to cross the East Sea
As tiny as leaves in the forest
The people risking their lives to cross the oceans
Like the sand in the scorching dessert
Hey, the heroes crossing the East Sea
Like the needles in the hay stack
Hey the people looking for freedom
It's difficult to look for you
Dear God, please look down to watch
The innocent child in the wrenching storm
Dear God, please look out in the oceans
For the elders who steer the wheels with all effort
And Poseidon please have mercy
For those who are newly-weds

Please human beings, please forefathers
Let me see land
Hey the people swallowed in the oceans
Buddha loves human beings
Yet God and Buddha are up in the heaven
Only humans are here on earth....
Phạm Duy

It was a gloomy afternoon when I paid a visit to the Vietnamese Boat People Memorial in the Asian Garden of Peaceful Eternity of the Westminster Memorial Park. For reasons I could not fathom, I found myself overwhelmed with feelings that were hard to describe, perhaps surreal; and all of a sudden, I thought about the poem above, once cited to me by one of my informants. Penned by Pham Duy, one of the most well-known composer of Vietnam, the poem highlights the struggles, the traumas, the tragedies, and above all the feelings of being abandoned and forgotten experienced by the boat people. At that very moment, in front of the memorial, I felt as though those who deceased in the vast ocean were there with the stories of their lives. Growing up in Vietnam during the 1980s when the boat people exodus was declining from its peak, all I knew about them was what the Vietnamese government had to say about them and what I, with the mind of a child, could grapple through the stories circulated in the public. I knew very little about death and traumas, about tragedies and sorrow; most of what I knew was that they were traitors who left Vietnam illegally for material gain. They were called as “dân vượt biên” (people who cross over the border) and in those narratives, “dân vượt biên” were used to refer to those who got caught and put into jail in Vietnam, not those who lost their lives at sea or those who made it to their desired destination.

The memorial contains four statues on a slab within a pool, the slab resembling a raft, and the pool representing a drop of water/blood. The figures on the raft are of a man, an older woman

and a younger woman holding a young child. Surrounding the memorial lay fifty four blocks of stone on which the names of over 6,000 deceased boat people are engraved. All together, the memorial is the presentation of the untold narratives, narratives that once buried under the cold deadly seas, narratives of the perished.

Not very far from the Vietnamese Boat People Memorial, the Vietnam War Memorial in Sid Goldstein Freedom Park, is another monument dedicated to the war by the Vietnamese Americans in Westminster. It is a place of remembrance commemorating the fall of Saigon. The memorial is a phenomenal structure complete with an eternal flaming torch, two soldiers, American and Vietnamese, posed as heroes of equal physical stature – and a flaming urn. It was dedicated in a park called Freedom on All American Way (name of a street), an extension of Westminster City Hall.

Both memorials were designed and mainly sponsored by Vietnamese Americans, and both tell their own stories. Monuments and memorials can often be used as interchangeable forms, but there are distinctions in intent between them. Arthur Danto writes:

We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget. Thus we have the Washington Monument but the Lincoln Memorial. Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. Memorials ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends. ... The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments we honor ourselves.¹

In other words, monuments are not generally built to commemorate defeats; the defeated dead are remembered in memorials. Whereas a monument most often signifies victory, a memorial refers to the life or lives sacrificed for a particular set of values. Whatever triumph a memorial

may refer to, its depiction of victory is always tempered by a foregrounding of the lives lost. For Vietnamese Americans in Orange County, the memorials are both defeat and victory. Perhaps they lost the war, and many lives were lost in the sea in Vietnam; but the ability to commemorate the dead can still be seen as the victory of the living in the U.S. In other words, those memorials speak to the fact that both the dead, or the memories of the dead, and the living are trapped in some corner the labyrinth of remembering and forgetting in both Vietnam's and America's cultural memories.

In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Marita Sturken contends that all memories are “”created” in tandem with forgetting” and that “forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory.”² In other words, cultural memory and all history are forged in a context in which details, voices, and impressions of the past are forgotten. In her opinion, the writing of a historical narrative necessarily involves the elimination of certain elements. Hence, according to Sturken, “the narrative of the Vietnam War [and its aftermath] as told in the United States foregrounds the painful experience of the American Vietnam veteran in such a way that the Vietnamese people, both civilians [including the refugees of both waves] and veterans are forgotten.”³ By the same token, in Vietnam cultural memories, I observe that there is not much room for the people who left the country after the war as well as those who seek refuge. In other words, they are ignored along with the American as well as the South Vietnamese veterans. This effacement in American history of the war, according to Sturken, is in part the result of the narrative process – the political re-inscription into American history of a disruptive story of a war lost. Similarly, in the case of Vietnamese version of the history of the war, that effacement, in my opinion, is also in part the result of the narrative process – the political re-inscription into Vietnamese history of a

triumphant story of a war won and a post-war successful reunification of the two regions of Vietnam. A desire for coherence and continuity produces forgetting. Hayden White has written that the “value attached to narratively in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, and reveries.”⁴ The desire for narrative closure thus forces upon historical events the limits of narrative form and enables forgetting. Unfortunately, in so many different ways, the Vietnamese refugees of the first wave and Vietnamese boat people, especially voices of their children, were left out or “forgotten” in those constructions of both sides.

Likewise, in *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard suggests that the postmodern differs from the modern by projecting “the unrepresentable in representation itself ... [it] searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.”⁵ He then argues that narratives which ‘neutralize violence’ by recuperating it into chronologies of before and after, cause and effect do their own kind of violence to the event. In his opinion, “[n]arrative organization is constitutive of diachronic time, and the time that it constitutes has the effect of “neutralizing” an “initial” violence ... of staging the obscene, of disassociating the past from the present, and of staging a recollection that must be a re-appropriation of the improper, achronological affect” – the ‘achronology which results from the shock of unassimilated traumatic experience. His work is a radical critique of “the limitations of all historicisms and “monumental” or memorializing histories that “forget” by having too certain, too definite, too representative, too narrativized ... a memory.’”⁶

It is the “forgotten” that I want to focus on in this chapter. The forgotten voices of the children who left Vietnam not by their own decision but by their parents’ or their elder relatives, the forgotten voices of the children who struggled to make it through in a new country.

Stories of the survivors

The poem in the epigraph for this chapter was penned by PhạmDuy, one of the most well-known Vietnamese poet and musical composers. In my opinion, the poem successfully captures what most of my informants who identify as boat people recounted: a sense of helplessness, a sense of being stranded and ignored, a sense of being thrown in a battle without escape and life was at the mercy of nature, and amazingly, a thirst for survival despite all the hardship. Interestingly, some of these themes are also characteristics of the accounts by people who left Vietnam right after the fall of Saigon. Despite the differences in terms of the circumstances under which they left Vietnam, the socio-economic classes they identify themselves with as well as the reasons for their plight out of the country, they share one thing in common: their tales are the tales of the children of those who seek refuge, and theirs are tales of experiences that span not just one but two cultures.

Various scholars have noted the dimensions, stages and particular problems of what might be called the refugee experience from more of a historical/sociological perspective. In the case of Vietnamese refugees, that experience is chronicled according to different stages through which Vietnamese refugees made their way to the U.S. For example, in *Transition to Nowhere: Vietnamese Refugees in America*, one of the very first books about the Vietnamese people in the U.S., William T. Liu provides an overview of the process of leaving Vietnam and being settled in America of Vietnamese refugees after the Vietnam War in 1975. In particular, he looks at

different stages that they went through from Vietnam to America. According to Liu, most refugees in the first wave and did go through four stages:

- (1) Leaving Vietnam;
- (2) Being in the transit, transition to nowhere;
- (3) Being at the camps;
- (4) And finally being sponsored and resettled.⁷

These stages are the framework to describe the experience of the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants. However, I argue that they also apply to the case of the second wave – the boat people. The only difference perhaps is the timeframe of their experiences, something I will be discussing in the pages to come. While those stages were laid out in many studies on the Vietnamese refugees, the focus is often placed on the resettlement and assimilation/adaptation process. As a matter of fact, my informants' narratives reinforced the stages laid out by Liu; they, however, provide a much richer text as to what really happened to those refugees in the particular stages they went through from their own perspective, how they dealt with the situations and more importantly, how that refugee experience changed and shaped their identity. Therefore, my intention in the following pages is not to explicate what the refugee experience of the 1.5ers of Vietnamese Americans is comprised of, but to examine how they responded to certain events that made of their refugee experience and how those events in turn shaped their identity later. In order to do so, I particularly look at the techniques with which they construct their narratives survival in their plight out of Vietnam and narratives of adaptation in the initial stage of adjusting into the culture of the new land. Moreover, because narratives are not constructed in a vacuum but socially in relation other narratives circulating about the same

events I will also examine the relationship between my informants' personal memories and Vietnamese and American cultural memories and histories.

Due to the interrelation between personal and cultural/historical memories from which personal and historical narratives are constructed, I contend that it is critical to have an examination of the historical framework that captures the experience of the first and the second wave of Vietnamese refugees to the United States which is about to be unveiled in the following pages through the exploration of the evacuation of Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the exodus of boat people late during the late 1970s and 1980s.

The April 1975 Evacuation

Unlike the common perception among my interviewees that the evacuation of Vietnamese people after the fall of Saigon was carried out in the last minute without preparation, the whole process was not necessarily unplanned. According to Sucheng Chan, as the South Vietnamese government seemed about to fall, the United States "hastily prepared to evacuate not only Americans and dependents but at-risk Vietnamese as well." The U.S. government moved quickly to deal with the whirlwind developments in Southeast Asia. On April 8th, the State Department began to consult with committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate about using the attorney general's parole authority to admit refugees.⁸ On April 14th, the attorney general agreed to admit the Vietnamese and Cambodian dependents of U.S. citizens under parole. The government also asked UNHCR and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM), originally established to aid displaced Europeans after World War II, to help find countries that might be willing to accept Indochinese refugees. Four days later, President Gerald Ford created an Interagency Task Force, composed of officials from a dozen federal agencies,

and asked it to plan for the reception of Indochinese refugees. A week after that, the attorney general extended parole to high-risk Vietnamese and to Cambodian who were abroad at the time.⁹ Also, according to Chan, until the last minute no one knew exactly how many people would be evacuated from South Vietnam. As the collapse of Saigon government appeared imminent, an arbitrary figure of one hundred and fifty thousand evacuees were chosen, with one hundred and twenty-five thousand slots for Vietnamese and five thousand for Cambodians. Part of the uncertainty came from the fact that Graham Martin, the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, refused to make evacuation plans public because he did not wish to provoke widespread panic that might hasten the fall of Thieu government.¹⁰

Evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft began on April 1, but it went slowly because many “non-essential” Americans who were told to leave refused to do so until their Vietnamese dependents received authorization to accompany them. Such authorization took time to obtain because the South Vietnamese government required people to apply for exit permits and passports before letting them leave and American officials said they must wait for visas if they wished to be admitted into the United States. However, once it was known that the North Vietnamese troops had reached the edge of the capital, evacuation moved into higher gear on April 22. Sympathetic American officials based at Saigon Tan Son Nhut Airport cut as much red tape as they could. In the following eight days, U.S. aircraft lifted out about seventy-five hundred people a day. That operation ended a week later.¹¹

The last-ditch evacuation efforts were chaotic. So many South Vietnamese planes and helicopters tried to land on the flight decks of the U.S. aircraft carriers anchored in the South China Sea that they had to push into the ocean to make room for others to land.¹²

Tens of thousands of Vietnamese who were definitely at risk failed to be evacuated while some who were not at risk bribed their way out.¹³ More than one hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese managed to escape before the North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon. Over seventy-three thousand did so by sea. Men in the Vietnamese Navy spirited their families and friends to safety in their ships. Twenty six South Vietnamese naval vessels showed up with some thirty thousand passengers at the U.S. naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines the first week of May. Other Vietnamese commandeered whatever boats they could and made their way to the waiting ships in the South China Sea or to the nearest port in Vietnam's neighboring countries.¹⁴

When the governor of Guam heard that Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos refused to let the United States house the refugees in the latter's country, he offered his island's hospitality. Overnight, Navy Seabees, aided by a wide variety of civilians, including tourists vacationing in Guam, erected a tent city capable of housing fifty thousand people at a time. The first planeload of refugees touched down on the tarmac only two hours after construction began. Over the next six months, officials of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS-now renamed as the Bureau of Immigration and Custom Enforcement within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security) and the Public Health Service examined and interviewed the refugees on Guam, as well as smaller numbers brought to the American military bases at Subic Bay and Wake Island, before they were allowed to leave for four reception centers on the U.S. mainland. Camp Pendleton in California opened as the first reception center on April 29, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas on May 2, and Eglin Air Base in Florida on May 4. A fourth military base, Fort Indiantown Gap on Pennsylvania, was hastily added on May 28 to relieve the overcrowding at the other three centers.¹⁵

The “Boat People” Exodus

Refuge-seekers continued to leave Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam after the American evacuation and resettlement efforts ended. The first of the “boat people” escaped from Vietnam and found their way mainly to Malaysia. Smaller numbers also landed in Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines. Until October 1975 – the U.S. deadline for placing refugees into American processing centers – the United States admitted all the refuge-seekers from Vietnam who fled by sea.¹⁶ The exodus did not stop there. People continued to leave Vietnam by boat during 1976 and 1977, but their stories were not heard much by the public due to little attention of journalists. Their number was very small compared to the number of “land people” from Laos who were entering Thailand during this period. Also, officials in the countries of first asylum where they landed preferred to keep arrival as quiet as possible because they feared a far larger exodus might ensue if people in Vietnam found out that their compatriot had managed to reach safe haven with ease.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Sucheng Chan argues that there are two main reasons why the number of boat people escaping Vietnam in the first two years after the fall of Saigon was relatively small. These reasons bear repeating in order to understand the narratives about and by former “boat people” and their children. First of all, within the first few days after the capturing of Saigon, the communist government quickly gathered certain groups of people – elected officials from the national assembly down to the village level, civil servants, members of non-Communist political parties, military officers, policemen, employees of various counterinsurgency programs, religious leaders, professors, teachers, writers, and artists – at specific locations to attend re-education sessions. Being misled by Local Communist Cadres who told them that the sessions they attend would last anywhere from three to thirty days, people

were willing to report to stations as told. However, to their surprise, they were sent to re-education camps where they were subjected to hard labor, a near-starvation diet, and political indoctrination. While some low-ranking civil servants and noncommissioned officers indeed were kept for just a few days of “thought reform classes,” a majority of the political prisoners remained incarcerated for years. However, when the inmates became so ill, the camp wardens released them to avoid high death toll.¹⁷

A second reason for the relatively small boat people outflow in the years of 1975 and 1977 is that initially life for many residents in the former South Vietnam did not change drastically. Communist leaders did not try to reunify the two halves of the country immediately because their first priority was to increase agricultural and industrial production.¹⁸ After the country was reunified on July 1, 1976, adopted a new name – the Socialist Republic of Vietnam – the pace of change quickened. Le Duan, the first Secretary of the Lao Dong party, announced that Vietnam could wait no longer to embark on its march toward socialism. In order for socialist reconstruction to proceed, he said, the “comprador bourgeoisie” and the “remnants of the feudal landlord class” must be eliminated, economic enterprises must be nationalized and large land holdings confiscated. The overall goal was to merge the economies of the two halves of the country into “a single system of large-scale socialist production.”¹⁹

According to UNHCR statistics, by November 1980 forty nations had resettled three hundred thousand out of the three hundred seventy thousand boat people in Southeast Asian and Hong Kong camps. However, in 1987 and 1988 the number of boat people crept up again partly because the Thai government, with the U.S. assistance, had managed to reduce the number and brutality of pirate attacks against the boat people in the Gulf of Thailand during the preceding years, and partly because processing under ODP had stalled.²⁰

A second Geneva Conference held on June 13-14, 1989, and attended by over seventy countries came up with a Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) to deal with the continuing outflow of refuge-seekers. In the subsequent years, the U.S. and dozens of other countries resettled a substantial number of refuge-seekers from Vietnam. By late 2001, the U.S. Congress made one last attempt to broaden the categories of Vietnamese who could be admitted into the United States which allowed a large number of Vietnamese people who are connected to former re-education detainees to come to the U.S.²¹

The above discussion fits the grand narrative as to why and how refuge-seekers from Vietnam have come to the United States. However, how members of the 1.5 generation have adapted to life in America and especially how they confront and overcame adversity with courage and fortitude as they forged new beginnings and identities for themselves and their families based on their journey to the new land is yet another different set of narratives that I was exposed to and I would like to discuss in the remaining pages.

Refugees' recollections

With a glimpse of sadness and solemnity, Lan Nguyen, who received me in her family's clothing shop in the Garden Mall on one of the "lazy afternoons," as she called it, told me about her "bumpy" journey to the United States in 1975 and her initial days in the U.S. The journey to her was one whose travelers did not know when and where it would be ended. Nguyen left Vietnam with her two sisters along with uncle's family on a boat owned by her uncle. She had a pretty vague idea of why they had to leave Vietnam, where they were heading for and how their lives would turn out to be. She recalled being told by her parents that she needed to leave with her aunt's family for a better future and that she would be united with the rest of her family later.

Similar to many other interviewees who comprise both the first and second waves of Vietnamese refugees, Nguyen constructed a narrative that portrays the so-called ‘refugee experience’ through the lenses of a child, an experience that encompasses precarious journeys, refugee camps with dismal conditions and later disorientation, struggles in school and many other arenas in her life in the initial stage of resettlement in the new homeland.

Like Lan Nguyen, the majority of my interviewees recalled a traumatic experience when it comes to their journey from Vietnam to America and the first resettlement stage in the new land whether they identify themselves as first or second wave refugees. Some of them recalled spending just a few days leaving Vietnam, being in transition and arriving in the U.S; others recounted spending months or even years going through the whole process. While the length and the intensity of the experience might vary, overall, I observe very unique patterns in the narratives by my informants: they are a mixture of the chaotic/confused refugee experience when it comes to memory – displayed in their confusion of person and tenses; and the linear accounts of the before/after, cause/effect when it comes to the format. In fact, I was initially baffled at how the majority of them present such chronological accounts of their experiences, and at the same time, I found myself struggle to comprehend the tangled vignettes of events that they created in each stage of their lives presented in their accounts. For most of us, perhaps, no radical break or traumas disrupt the sense of flow from past to present: we may feel quite different from our childhood or teenage selves, and events such as the birth of a child or the death of a beloved such as a parent or a grandparent do constitute marked stages which may divide the pattern of our lives into a ‘before’ and ‘after’. Nevertheless, experiences such as war, migration, abuse, assault or serious accident may take the relationship between the self ‘before’ and the self ‘after’ much more problematic, and this definitely presents itself in the narratives by my informants.

Moreover, for a lot of my interviewees, their memories are usually embedded in narratives by the elders - their grandparents, parents, or relatives; and so many times, their voices are forgotten in those narratives. Many of them confided that they hardly told their stories to anyone simply because they were considered as children and traditionally, in Vietnamese culture, children do not usually have a say in a lot of issues. Even when they have all grown up, they do not get to tell those stories because “those stories are told by [their] parents and have already been out there.” In the following pages, we are about to explore the journey of members of the 1.5 generation, a journey remembered and recounted by themselves. By choosing to break the silence and narrate their traumatic experience using a chronological order, at the same time highlighting the disruptions, chaos and struggles they went through from the day they left Vietnam to the initial adjustment to the new culture, my narrators strategically tell us that they do adapt to the new culture and be a part of the mainstream while still maintain Vietnamese aspects of their identity.

Leaving Vietnam and being in transition

Leaving Vietnam and being in transition are crucial turning points in the refugee narratives recounted by my informants. People left Vietnam without knowing what was waiting for them ahead. Whether they identify themselves as refugees of first or second wave, the majority of them describe elaborate details of their plight out of Vietnam and days or months or years in refugee camps; journeys highlighted with a mixture of hope and despair, fear and courage, anxiety and relief, danger lurking everywhere and miracles presenting themselves out of nowhere – journeys of the unforgettable.

Tuan Nguyen who left Vietnam on a boat owned by his uncle when he was ten years old and now settle in Westminster recounted,

The journey was seemingly endless and we sailed across the ocean. It took us three weeks to reach Indonesia. The trip was a horrible and frightening experience. We were robbed by pirates who, fortunately for us, only wanted our valuable items and did not kill anyone. The condition within the boat was hell. Because of the large number of people, no one could make his or her way to the bathroom. So, when Mother Nature called, we used some kind of jars or container. Many times, children could not wait for containers and urinated on the deck. In addition to the smell of urine, there were body odors and the foul smell of vomit from those who were sea sick. To make matter worse, we lacked of water and food the entire time when we were at sea. The sight of people suffering from hunger and thirst made me long for home. However, nothing frightened me more than the death of the person sitting next to me. As we were so tightly squeezed together, I thought he was asleep. I did not know he was dead until I tapped on his shoulder to see if he needed some water. Instead of responding to me, his cold and pale face fell against mine. I was in such a state of shock that I screamed and wetted my pants. Then a few volunteers dragged his body to the edge of the boat and tossed the corpse into the open sea. For so many nights after that incident, I was afraid to sleep. This event continued to terrify me for years. Many of my informants who identified themselves as boat people recalled similar experiences, ones in which human condition falls to the bottom of misery, ones which memory retains no matter how they want to forget, and ones which forever define them as “boat people.” Such

experiences are narrated with the collapse of time and space coupled with fragmented memories. I noticed how my informants switched from past to present tense and vice versa and showed confusion when it came to names of places which, in my opinion, informs us that the narrator is reliving the traumas and chaos. Like a lot of my interviewees, Tuan was caught in his own imagination and confusion when he was asked to clarify “here” and “there,” “now and “then.”

In Tuan’s narrative, fear and anxiety predominated; and death is a constant theme. The hard condition was too much for the imagination of a child like him. At the same time, other factors such as the lack of food and water, the horrible conditions of the boats they fled in contributed to this situation. When I asked him why he knew it took that much time in the ocean before reaching the land, he told me that was what most people on that boat said to him. However, “the feelings, the smell, the thought of the possibility of dying prevailed.”

Similarly, Loan Nguyen, another boat person recalled a tragedy and a miracle she experienced in the vast ocean on her way to “who know where,”

On the fourth night, a loud crash woke us up. People started screaming as the boat tilted to one side. Everyone rushed up the stairs, pushing their way out of the cabin. People pulled each other’s hair and fistfight broke out. As the water rose up to my neck, someone grasped my wrist and pulled me out. I thought my arm was being yanked off. It was pitching dark but somehow I managed to climb on to the rock that had punctured our boat. I was so relieved when I found my brothers, sisters, cousins and my aunt. We realized we had survived a shipwreck. By the time everyone had climbed to the rocks, the fuel tanks were leaking rapidly. Soon, the sea was shimmering black. A dead baby was still lying on the deck. Two women wrapped their hands around the bawling mother to prevent her from going

back for the dead baby. Tears just came to my eyes, and I thought about my younger brother and sisters who were still in Vietnam.

Death to these boat people was not just a possibility, it was reality. Hundreds of thousands of boat people perished at sea in their quest of freedom. It was understandable why death was just a matter of time. My informants mostly agreed that when people left Vietnam on those tiny boats, they knew that they should be prepared to deal with the worst. Tiny little boats, designed for a handful of fishermen were turned into escape vessels on which were cramped with 100 people or more. People died drowning, being attacked by pirates and murdered. However, amid tragedies, sorrows and tears, some did find miracles. Loan Nguyen was among those who were lucky enough to have made it to the U.S. with all her brothers and sisters and relatives.

Not as fortunate as Loan Nguyen, Tu Pham experienced the trauma of losing her beloved father and siblings on her way to America with her relatives. Her recollection, therefore, was permeated with death and sorrow,

After spending ... I don't remember how long on the boat, we made it to PulauBidong, an island in Malaysia. [...] Dying was a common event on PulauBidong. Each day, numerous people died of various diseases and accidents. A few were killed when falling coconuts struck them on the head. Other slipped off rocks while trying to fish. Nothing was a surprise any more. One day we received a letter from my mother. As my uncle was reading the letter, his hands were trembling so hard, and as soon as he finished reading, he screamed. Tears flooded his eyes, rolling down to his hollow cheeks and dropping to the ground. Everyone was gathering around us and wanted to know what happened but my uncle did not respond. A woman took up the letter that my uncle had dropped on

the floor and read it to us. My mom wrote that the boat on which my parents and my brothers and sisters boarded to leave Vietnam sank as soon as it left the port and more than half of the passengers died. She found the bodies of my brother and sisters and buried them, but she never found my father's body. The woman could not continue reading because she was crying so hard. However, no tears poured out of my eyes. I pinched myself to cry, but because I had cried so much since I left Vietnam, there were no more tears left. Although I felt as if a sharp needle was stabbing my heart, my eyes were dry.²²

Pham did not cry when she told me this dark chapter of her life. But her facial expression and posture told me that the pain was indescribable. The vivid and vigilant Pham that I had seen an hour before was suddenly gone, and instead I saw in front of me a drooped figure with no apparent connection to reality. In her solemn eyes, I noticed a sense of despair and surrender. When I said "sorry," she told me in response, "I am used to it, you know, it's life." "It is life" and "Nothing was a surprise anymore" have become mottos for a lot of my informants when it comes to deal with the uncontrollable parts of their lives, and in many ways, those attitudes have become a mechanism to help people move on in their new world with so much hardship and unexpected. "It is life" and "Nothing was a surprise anymore" are also part of the "forgotten" narratives – part of the untold stories about being Vietnamese Americans. For Vietnamese Americans in general and members of the 1st generation in particular, surrenders do not represent what they believe in and stand for. Their stories can be about both struggles and successes, defeats and victories, but they cannot be about surrender. Yet, for members of the 1.5 generation, it is understandable that they talked about surrender, I would argue, because their experience is indeed about surrender and about dealing with the uncontrollable. In fact, a lot of my

interviewees were only children when they were taken out of Vietnam, meaning they did not have enough power to make the decision on their own. That is surrender. Once they arrive in the United States, their identities are challenged, shaped and reshaped in ways that they, again, do not really have full control over. Once again, “That is life.” I will get back to this later in this chapter and chapter three.

To make matter worse, the experience of death, of disaster, of pirates and traumas coupled with the feeling of being rejected and unwelcomed robbed away one last thing in a lot of my informants: faith and belief. Lien Tran, a hairdresser recalled her feeling when she and the people on her boat finally saw land,

Five days later, we found land. It was a rocky island called PulauBidong in Malaysia. The fishermen we had met at sea advised us to destroy our boat once we got near the island. Otherwise, they said, the Malaysian authority would tow us back to sea. . . . The Malaysian officials led us to a camping area. There were no built structures and we had to sleep under the stars until we could construct our own shelter. Unfortunately for us, a harsh wind howled all night as needlelike rain pelted us. I thought there was no God to answer our prayers. It was up to us to make the best of everything. My belief in God ceased to exist.

Lien Tran’s situation was not unique. A lot of times, the refugee camps were in really bad condition because the first asylum countries were not ready for large number of boat people. Boat people during the peak of the wave were even left at/pushed back to sea and rejected when trying to seek asylum in the first countries like Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia for fear of overcrowding and other social issues. For those who made it to the camps like Lien Tran, life

was not so much better. They suffered from malnutrition, diseases and terrible housing condition.

Tu Nguyen, another the boat person talked about her time in the camps on PulauBidong,

For months, all we had to eat were noodles and rice porridge for both lunch and dinner. We were not given any breakfast. To make matter worse, millions of black flies settled on everything we ate and drank. Diarrhea was rampant. As for our shelter, the brilliant sun was our cover. My once pale complexion transformed into dark brown skin and my once straight hair turned into an entwined bird's nest where hundreds of lice made their home. Only three months later were we supplied with metal sheet to build a long house for shelter of the fifty families at that time.

The horrible condition of the camp was made worse by the people who run them. Being abused, sexually, emotionally, physically, was something people had to deal with on a daily basis. Tu Nguyen added,

The people who guarded the temporary camp were horrible. The guards were sometimes rapists. If they saw a young girl and they wanted to make her sleep with them, they might beat her if she resisted. Therefore, my Mom was very careful about our sleeping arrangements, always putting female members in the middle. ... The guards treated us badly. Every morning we had to stand in line. They would call each person's name out, and then sometimes they would call out a young girl to sing to them. They liked to make fun of people. If there was somebody they didn't like – man, woman, old, young, whatever – they would call them out and talked about them and made fun of them. Every time I remember that camp, it upsets me because they didn't treat us like humans.

To a lot of my informants, though, the worst part was when they witnessed their own people acted against each other. In Vietnamese culture, as discussed in chapter 1, the tradition of helping each other in difficult time is highly appreciated and people are supposed to be reliable, especially in difficult time. A saying that almost any Vietnamese can cite is, “La lanhdum la rach,” which means an intact leaf should cover a torn leaf. Therefore, to see wrong doings against one’s self or one’s relatives by one’s very own people can be very shocking, especially to a child. Christina Trinh described her disbelief and surprise when she recalled an incident happening in a refugee camp in Guam,

An event that took place there made me realize that even among our people there was jealousy and dishonesty. I remember lying on my cot as a robber crawled from under one cot to the next. Seeing a small knife in his hand, I dared not scream. When he got under my mother’s cot, he grabbed her purse. She woke up screaming while holding on to her purse. My uncle leaped out of his cot and chased him off with a stick. Even as a nine-year-old, I asked why we could not help each other instead of robbing what few belongings each of us had. I guess the answer is a concept that I learned many years later: survival of the fittest.

Similar to the stories my informants tell about their time in Vietnam under the communist regime that were discussed in chapter one; moral decadence was prevalent in their narratives about their experiences in refugee camps. This, again, is yet another part of the “forgotten” narratives that I have discussed so far. Stories like this are usually conveniently forgotten for a lot of reasons. First of all, it is forgotten because it should not be exposed. Vietnamese people, in many situations, conduct their lives and their behaviors according to values they believe in that are expressed in proverbs and sayings, and one of which is “Tótkhoe, xáu che,” meaning “Show the

good, hide the bad.” Trinh’s experience potentially exposes the bad, and thus should be hidden/forgotten. Secondly, in my opinion, incidents like this can be considered as trivia and is not worth remembering in narratives by members of the first generation whose concerns might have focused more on survival and responsibility to their children than on how they were treated by their fellow refugees. Whatever the reasons are, memories about moral decadence do contribute part of the “forgotten” and part of the characteristics of narratives by members of the 1.5 generation who identify themselves as “boat people.”

People of the first wave recalled a somewhat less traumatic experience with shorter transition time and easier trips, yet not so much less turbulence. Hao Tran, a doctor in Westminster who left Vietnam with his entire family before the official collapse of Saigon recalled,

Fortunately, we were able to board a U.S. military cargo plane, despite all the families who were shuffling and pushing to get on that plane. On April 28, 1975, two days before the fall of Saigon, our plane took off. In it, many Vietnamese families were tightly packed together on the floor. My family joined the crowd on the floor. Some people who were not used to flying got sick and threw up. It was awful. We finally landed on an American military base in the Philippines after a few hours. There [in the Philippines], we heard the news that the Communists had captured Saigon. In the following days, thousands of South Vietnamese, who knew how oppressive the Communists would be also tried to escape.

We stayed in the Philippines for only a few days before we were flown to Guam. The Philippines government refused to take any refugees permanently. Before we flew to Guam, we got immunization shots and had to fill out some forms. We did

not stay in Guam long; our next destination was Camp Pendleton. My family was among the first batch of Vietnamese to arrive there. At Camp Pendleton, I saw how different everything looked compared to Vietnam. All we saw were hills and brown dessert landscape – so different from the green scenery in my village. I and my brother and younger sister adjusted to life in Camp Pendleton much more easily than did my parents and older sisters simply because we were younger. My busy days in that camp helped me overcome my fear. Since I enrolled in an English-as-a-Second-Language class, I could play with the other children of my age.

The U.S. involvement in rescuing and resettling the first wave of refugees, despite its unprepared manner, did help ease the transition process for a lot of Vietnamese refugees in the first wave like Hao Tran and his family members. However, the drastic changes in time and space as well as cultural norms in the camps in the new country did pose a lot of difficulties and traumas for these first wave refugees. Hao Tran, like many other informant recalled “fear and confusion” experienced by their parents and relatives upon arrival in the refugee camps in the U.S. It is interesting, however, to see how they also pointed out the fact that they think they could adjust more easily to life in the new land simply because they were younger. This very affirmation proved to be very contradicting when they talked about their struggles to adjust to the new culture, something I will discuss later in this chapter.

Tina Nguyen, a nurse, recalled her first contact with America, experiences that resonate what Hao Tran went through,

That ride from the airport to the motel was the first time I saw America. We rode in a car. I looked at the car and thought it was beautiful. Everything I saw in

America looked totally different and strange to me. He [someone sent by the sponsor] took us to the motel, where I took a shower. I didn't know which handle was for hot water and which was for cold, and then I put my hand under the faucet, I screamed because it was too hot.

[...]

There were thousands of families in Camp Pendleton. Each family slept in a tent with cots. We ate in a large tent that was known as the mess hall. I found it difficult to adjust to American food. We even tried to cook our own food but we almost burned out tent down with the fire we started. The marines in the camp taught us to speak English. They played with us children and gave us toys and candy. But the adults were sad because our simple life in Vietnam had vanished. It was replaced by fear and confusion.

Both Hao Tran and Tina Nguyen told their stories through the lenses of child, and thus highlighted some aspects that are forgotten in other narratives by their parents and scholars who study Vietnamese Americans: happiness and innocence in the midst of miseries and worries. Perhaps miseries and concerns were too overwhelming and overpowering that the joy and the innocence of children who were exposed to new things for the first time and who got to make friends in a new place are ignored because they, the children, were not so visible in the bigger picture of the refugee experience.

All in all, there is a distinct difference between the first and the second waves of refugees when it comes to their journeys and their time in refugee camps. However, they did share a lot of similarities, among which is the thirst for education even when they were still in the camps where studying was not considered as a priority by many people.

As discussed in Chapter 1, education is highly valued in Vietnamese cultural tradition and it was no exception for refugees even when they were on their way to a safer place. A majority of my informants, both first and second waves, spent considerable time to talk about education and their effort to get access to education even in the usually dismal conditions of the camps they were in. In many cases, access to education is the highlight and a beacon of hope for them during the depressing days in the camps. Nguyen Hoang who was 10 years old when he arrived at PulauBidong recalled,

I went to two different schools in the camp. One class, from 1:00 to 4:00 P.M., was like a Vietnamese school that taught regular subjects such as the Vietnamese language, science, math, and social studies. But I also went to morning classes for adults because I wanted to learn English. At age 10, I was the youngest in the class, and received attention for doing so well, but it is easier for young people to learn a foreign language.

Nguyen Hoang was from a middle class family in Vietnam and he was aware of the value of education probably because his parents taught him what he needed to know about it, and hence to him, going to school was a matter of course. He even went as far as to attend classes not intended for him simply because he wanted to. Tuan Nguyen, on the other hand, was a son of a farmer in Vietnam and did not have any opportunity to go to school back there. He did not know what a class was like until he was in the camp. He remembered,

One thing we did get at PulauBidong was education. At age ten, I began classes. It was the first time I'd ever gone to school, and I loved it. Even though I had a hard time at first, I soon loved to take the honor roll. Many of my friends had the same

chance to go to school, but they didn't value it so much. Going to school was the best thing for me. I had been through so much that caused me to value my education. Now I really appreciated the educational opportunity I had in PulauBidong. I just wanted to learn.

By distancing himself with his friends who "didn't value it [education] so much," Tuan Nguyen told me a narrative of someone who is successful thanks to his awareness of the importance of education and implied upward mobility. As we are going to find out later in chapter 3, this is one of the factors that makes the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans who they are in the present day. However, both Nguyen Hoang and Tuan Nguyen would soon find out that attending school in America not only satisfies their desire or their thirst of knowledge they need, it will also give them the knowledge they probably would not want to know: the continued process of racial formation and discrimination which will be discussed in the pages that follow. Yet another aspect that is somewhat forgotten in other narratives about the experience of children of immigrations in general and of Asian immigrants in particular, as well as narratives about the model minority.

The initial stage of adaptation in the U.S.

In the narratives of my informants, the moment they realized they were in America, the land of their dream, was a relief since they thought the transition was over. Yet while the somewhat more physical transition might have ended, the mental transition was yet to begin. The actual resettlement/adaptation process and the day-to-day contact with people in the new culture pose problems and struggles that most of my informants could not anticipate during their early days in the refugee camps both in and outside the U.S.

Richard Alba and Victor Nee note that the geographic concentration of immigrants is guided primarily by social networks, whereas for refugees, at least upon arrival, their original destination is determined by government agencies and private sponsorship.²³ At the same time, the Vietnamese arrived as refugees in the U.S. at a time when

- (1) the public wanted to forget about Vietnam, hence they were not receptive to the reminder posed by Vietnamese refugees;
- (2) there was lingering prejudice against non-Caucasians;
- (3) the job situation was unpromising; and
- (4) interest was receding from social concerns and social action efforts, and persons and communities were thinking of their own economic welfare and sufficiency.²⁴

These circumstances had great influence upon the way in which Vietnamese refugees were processed and resettled. On the one hand, they, like other refugees, need much emotional and practical support, and traditionally would receive much of this from family and fellow countrymen.²⁵ On the other hand, the U.S. government was caught in the exigencies of a massive resettlement effort. In most cases, the resettlement for Vietnamese refugees was in the hands of voluntary organizations/agencies. According to Karin Aguilar-San Juan, in the first few years of U.S. resettlement, federal agencies purposefully dispersed Vietnamese across all fifty states. The intent of this “scatter policy” appears to be a matter of interpretation: some analysts insist that dispersal was intended to facilitate assimilation, lessening the burden on small municipalities whose resources might be easily drained.²⁶ However, Gail P. Kelly pointed out another explanation for that “scatter policy” as she noted in her article “Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s,” “... the U.S. government put considerable pressure on them [voluntary agencies] to disperse refugees throughout the country and prevent the development of large ethnic communities that might create tensions between

local, state, and federal governments or put undue strains on local community resources.”²⁷ In other words, the point was to “avoid another Miami,” a reference to the concentration of Cuban refugees in Florida.²⁸ According to Aguilar-San Juan, whether the wish to prevent a second Miami was motivated by a benevolent desire to help refugees integrate into the U.S. society, by a negative xenophobic impulse, or by a desire to forestall the emergence of a right-wing interest group are all plausible explanation.²⁹

However, as observed by several scholars, Vietnamese refugees did not stay where designated. By June 1976 these first-wave refugees relocated, abandoning their sponsors and often their isolation. Their movement was from rural to urban areas, from northeastern states to southern and western states. By 1978 one third of all refugees were concentrated in California; another 10 percent were in Texas. As of 1983, 90 percent of all refugees were in 10 states.³⁰

Meanwhile, for their part, according to Kelly, after re-migrating,

Vietnamese have experienced a host of adaptation problems, many of which derived from the traumatic conditions under which they left Vietnam, the death of family members in flight, the separation of families. In addition, they have experienced significant downward social and occupational mobility; several studies have documented cases of alienation, mental illness, and family disruption.³¹

Inherent in Kelly’s observations is the manifestation of different factors that have impact on the adaptation process of Vietnamese Americans in their initial days settling in the U.S. However, most of these observations strike me as too general, by which I mean they can be used to talk about any groups of refugees to the U.S at the beginning of their resettlement process. What about their effort to assimilate/adapt? How did they go about resolving those problems to move on? What makes them different from other groups of refugees? Or are they all similar?

In "Community Structure and Vietnamese Refugee Adaptation: The Significance of Context," an empirical study by Paul Starr and Alden Roberts in 1982, the authors argue that many Vietnamese refugees saw past personal difficulties as having inoculated them against the negative, and instilled the attitude "that which does kill me, strengthens me."³² Other studies found that many Vietnamese refugees possessed a great degree of optimism, expecting their lives to improve markedly within five years, including occupational advancement, income, and overall quality of life.

These studies, however, focused more on the first generation without really examining the initial adaptation process of members of the 1.5 generation, most of whom are children of the first generation Vietnamese Americans. While only a few published studies focus on the first-generation of Vietnamese immigrants, even fewer focus on the 1.5 generation. One of the most recent studies on this generation is a dissertation titled *Vietnamese American Identities: How Race, Gender, and Class are Reflected in Cultural, Language and Technological Barriers* (2011) by Xuan Truong Thi Nguyen from Washington State University. This dissertation examines the intersections of race, gender, class with language, cultural and technological barriers as reflected in the experience of first and 1.5 generation of *Vietnamese American* refugees, immigrant parents, and their children in Seattle Public Schools (SPS) and the surrounding areas. Most Vietnamese interviewees in her study "face barriers to upward mobility, racial conflicts outside the home, and are portrayed as "others."³³ This study adds new knowledge by examining how technological barriers hinder Vietnamese immigrants in their struggles to overcome racial, class, and gender discrimination during acculturation. The project also explores complex interactions concerning generational solidarity and conflicts between first and 1.5 generation Vietnamese immigrant parents and their children in the greater Seattle area. In particular, it explores whether

the consumption of digital media technology, such as Internet sites, CDs, DVDs, and video games, creates more parent-child conflicts than harmonious relations for these families. Her observation shows that “while many Vietnamese fathers still uphold traditional gender roles in their families, they tend to encourage daughters to improve technological skills and academic achievement.”³⁴ Besides, her findings demonstrate that “regardless of socioeconomic hardships, racial and gender inequalities, and technological barriers, many *Vietnamese American* parents, regardless of marital status, try to overcome these struggles to rebuild their new lives, bridge the digital divide, and be part of the mainstream society.”³⁵

I find Nguyen’s examination of the barriers through the intersection of race, class and gender very useful especially because it helps deconstruct the conception of “model minority,” a stereotype that so often Asian Americans including Vietnamese Americans are associated with. Nguyen’s collection of oral histories in her study is also enriching in how it shows Vietnamese Americans as a heterogeneous group. While the study does include the 1.5 generation, the focus is more on the barriers to upward mobility that Vietnamese Americans have to face as a whole group. The 1.5 generation is mainly mentioned in her discussion on the generational conflicts between them and the 1st generation. However, members of the 1.5 generation also constructed narratives that explored issues of racial and cultural identity in the predominantly white U.S., especially in the school setting where the majority of them had their first encounter of being racialized and racializing themselves. In the following pages, I will be telling the stories of members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans through their recollections of their school days in America and the discriminations they encountered. In doing so, I intend to explore the issues relating to the construction of racial and cultural identities among my informants.

A tough beginning for a “small, yellow alien”

American immigration from the perspective of the immigrants/refugees themselves differed greatly from nativist views. Oscar Handlin's well-known book, *The Uprooted*, focuses specifically upon the alienation of the immigrant experience. This includes the factors which forced immigrants to move from their homelands and the general disruptions of their lives during this movement from one place to another. In addition, their stories chronicle the feeling of foreignness that they had while attempting to adjust to life in America.

Handlin's discussion of the feeling of foreignness shed light on the understanding of the Vietnamese children immigrants. Like their European counterparts during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a change in both physical and cultural environment poses a plethora of challenges and difficulties, and in many ways, I would argue, their struggle is even harder compared to their European counterparts because of the obvious differences in their physical traits and their culture. For these Vietnamese children who grew up in a more communal and somewhat more crowded society, the struggle to adapt to more individual lifestyles proved the greatest challenge. The change from being able to rely on almost everyone around them to having to be responsible for one's action at school and many other social arenas - such as taking care of other siblings while parents were at work - created a sense of disorientation for these refugee children. The overwhelming nature of the sprawling and vast landscape in the new land imposed a feeling of smallness on these refugees and further reinforced their alienation and loneliness. The shift from speaking Vietnamese to having to start learning English added to the harsh obstacles of adjustment. In addition, awareness of differences in physical traits and the attitudes perceived from people in America enhanced the alienation they felt from within. Interestingly, all of these

challenges present themselves in the accounts my informants gave about their initial stage in adapting to the new culture.

Phung Le, a clothing shop owner in Westminster recalled his first experience of feeling alienated as a Vietnamese child in a predominantly white neighborhood,

When we arrived in Southern California [from Guam], I expected to see a lot of Asian people, but no, most of our neighbors were White. I did not feel comfortable among them because they often stared or frowned at us. At times, I heard “they are Vietnamese” whispered behind my back. A Spanish-speaker called me “China.” Those remarks made me feel like a dirty kid who lived in a trash dump and smelled like shit. Although I was upset, I could not defend myself. This feeling of helplessness was the most depressing.

Phung Le’s remark resonates what Frank Wu in *Yellow* (2002) observed. A lot of times, Asian Americans are lumped into one group. Everyone is Chinese. The frustration that Phung Le had because of his being treated differently – being stared at or frowned at – was exacerbated by his being recognized as someone he was not. Phung Le contended that it was insulting to him. Even now, after staying in the U.S. for over 25 years, he still encounters incidents as such, and to him, “it is discrimination.”

Hao Truong, a temporary housewife in Garden Grove recounted an even harsher reality in her first day at school in Michigan with apparent discomfort,

On the first day at school, I was in culture shock. My brothers, sister, and I stuck out like sore thumbs in a sea of Caucasian faces I felt inferior and useless because I was so different. My hair was the wrong color, my nose was flat, and I did not speak English. I felt angry and ashamed at the same time. Although the

Caucasians around me were very patient in trying to help me learn the language, I often felt very offended by their facial expressions that signified to others how stupid they thought I was. Everyday brought uneasiness and an endless supply of humiliation and degradation. I wondered if I could ever be as good as white people. I thought of myself as a short, yellow alien. I hated myself and wished I had blond hair and blue eyes. I struggled and tried to learn the language so that I could be like everyone else – White.

There is so much in her short account of her first day at school, but the internalized hatred for oneself because of being a “short, yellow alien,” being “stupid,” not as “good” and a desire to be white is really disturbing to me. In many ways, it echoes W.E.B Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness.” Although the Vietnamese people do not have the same experience as that of the Black people in the United States, a long history of Vietnam being colonized by the French and patronized by the U.S. is enough to make its people feel less about themselves. In other words, like a lot of Vietnamese people and children of her age, Hao Truong, through her narrative, recounted her suffering from a damaged self-image shaped by the perceptions and treatment of white people not after but before her arrival to the United States.

Mindy Tran, in a similar situation at school found herself lucky to have found someone who looked similar to be friends with and to identify with, another Asian American student. Yet, the humiliation she felt for herself for not knowing the language was depicted as a drive for her wanting to be similar with the dominant group of students in her class. She recalled,

I entered the fourth grade. On my first day at school, my teacher, a blond woman in her late thirties, asked me what my name was. I could not understand a word what she was saying. I turned my head and saw other children looking at me. I

turned my head back to look at my teacher. She smiled at me and I suddenly felt shy. I put my head down and furtively looked at her by rolling my eyeballs upward. After a while, she asked a little Asian girl to translate. Her Vietnamese was weird but I did understand what she said. Seeing a piece of chalk at the blackboard, I got out of my seat, went to the blackboard, grabbed the chalk and wrote my name in Vietnamese on the blackboard. When I finished, I turned around and saw all the kids laughing so hard at me. I was so confused and scared. My palms were sweating. I glanced at the teacher and she seemed amused. She led me to a seat next to the little Asian girl so that she could help me. It was a relief for me, actually. She was cute and she was like me in a way. I will never forget that first day at school. I immediately realized that in order to fit in with my classmates and to communicate with them, I had to learn English.

Both Hao Truong's and Minday Tran's desire to "fit in" was understandable. Beside the internalized self-hatred they each probably found for themselves, were literally thrown into the new culture without much preparation. And trying to "fit in" was a strategy to survive. While the drive proved to be beneficial to a lot of my informants, it also causes a lot of damages when it comes to being back with their own people. The very Mindy Truong, after moving to California at the age of sixteen recalled being a stranger among her own people,

On my first day at school in Garden Grove, I did not know whether I should cry or rejoice when I saw that Asians formed an overwhelming majority in the class. In Ann Harbor, I had always been the only Asian in many of my classes, so I did not know how to associate with Asians. Mentally, I felt I was superior to them

because they could speak English properly. This proved to be a grave mistake on my part because they also thought I was inferior – I now could speak only one language, English, while they knew both English and Vietnamese. Some called me a “banana” – White inside and yellow outside. I was ridiculed for trying to be white when I was not. I was confused and depressed. I could not make friend with anyone. I wanted to tell my parents but could not express myself with my broken Vietnamese. Luckily, my father saw the struggle I was going through and enrolled me in a Vietnamese-language school.

Identity crisis as a result of their desire to fit in is pretty common among my informants, especially those who came to the U.S. when they were under 10 years old. This issue is caused by a lot of factors including the parents not having enough time to ensure their children’s speaking Vietnamese and learn about their culture at the beginning due to their own struggle in the new society, something I will discuss further in this chapter and the subsequent one.

As mentioned above, the parents could not attend to rearing their children and teaching them the values that they themselves had been taught by their parents. To further exacerbate this problem, parents could barely provide enough food, clothing and other necessities to smooth their children's transition from their home country to life in the new land, which in turn, has a negative impact on how the children perform at school. Hoan Tran who was 15 when he first came to the U.S. told me about his first year in the U.S.,

I arrived in Michigan and was sponsored by a church during the first year when we were there. We had to buy old clothes in thrift stores to wear, but people gave us a lot of food. My parents got some temporary jobs, but they were laid off very soon. It was hard, it was in the countryside. They [Americans there] planted only

corn and apples. No job opportunities. We ended up moving to a bigger town, Ann Harbor. I was asked to go to school, to learn English; but I could not concentrate on studying. I had to go to school and took care of the family at the same time, since I helped my parents with the work at the grocery stores they opened in Ann Harbor, I did not really think a lot about studying. I had to cook, wash our clothes and worked to help my parents with the bills.

Hoan Tran's situation is not unique among the children of Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. My husband's cousins were in a similar situation when they first came to America in the early eighties. Living off welfare during the first year did not help them much. With a household of four children, his aunt had to resort to taking clothes home to sew and his cousins helped their mother with her job. They recounted having a really difficult time being at school because of their lack of sleep and concentration. Many of my informants expressed disappointment in their harsh reality for they thought life would be different in the U.S. when they were still in Vietnam. What they found upon arriving was that the American Dream was not that easy to obtain.

To a lot of these young children, what made it worse were the differences between their Vietnamese culture and the new American culture when it comes to food. Usually, their parents are so poor that they cannot afford to buy enough food for them and a lot of times feed them with the traditional food, which can be a source of embarrassment to their children when they have to eat it in the public.

During lunch time, everyone ate sandwich and drank milk. I was reluctant to take out my lunch box, but my hunger could not wait. So, I got out my container and removed the lid. The smell of rice and spicy fish sauce wafted across the dining area. A few students covered their noses while others stood up and moved away. I

was so embarrassed and desperately wished the earth would swallow me up. Instead, I pretended not to notice and waited until everyone had left the dining area to dump my container and its contents into the trash can. Even though I was very hungry, I felt I had to get rid of all the evidence for the crime I had committed.³⁶

The uneasiness and discomfort accompanied with the self-hatred attitude that I found in a lot of my informants' narratives made me question the veracity of what they told me earlier about the reasons they left Vietnam. The way they recounted those reasons left the impression that they were also the ones who decided to flee Vietnam. If they did were so willing to leave Vietnam, why did it have to be so hard for them to adjust to the new land and its culture? Granted that the process is affected by both themselves and the receiving country/culture, but shouldn't they overcome those problems they deal with more easily? These questions make me turn to the definition of the 1.5 generation again, to be more precise, not just the definition but the characteristics of this particular generation.

The 1.5 generation is defined by Roberge as immigrants who come to the United States "sometime during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood and who thus have life experiences that straddle two or more nations, cultures, and languages." According to Roberge these students fall between the adult immigrants, the first generation and the U.S born children, the second generation. They share characteristics of both native U.S born and newcomers. Roberge has worked mainly with Asian students and Asian 1.5ers and believed that they do share the oppressions of "involuntary minorities,"³⁷ such as the African Americans. The author explained "Generation 1.5ers did not come here voluntarily; they were dragged along with their parents, kicking and screaming most of the time and often did not want to come to the

U.S.”.³⁸This statement can fit in many cases; especially for those children who come to another country as refugees as Southeast Asians including Vietnamese. Who would want to leave their homes, and risk their lives and give up what they have back home to come to an unknown country? There must be push factors which force these Southeast Asian families to migrate, including to escape the difficult circumstances in their country of origin or to seek for better opportunities in another country. Thus, Roberge considered that in many cases this 1.5 generation children do not come to American voluntary as described by Ogbu. Furthermore, Roberge also addressed that the cultural stereotype, such as the “model minority,” that does not fit for many of these children. The author stated “A lot of my students are not good at math and a lot of my students are not eager, obedient, willing immigrants who are working hard for the American dream, who every day are thankful that they can be in America”.³⁹Roberge strongly suggested that these children come here involuntarily and face many obstacles and stresses like other involuntary and disadvantaged minority groups in the United States.

While I do not completely agree with Roberge that all of these children including the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans were involuntarily brought to the U.S. because a lot of my informants indicate otherwise, I find his discussion useful to explain the discrepancies in some of my informants’ accounts. Because of the age span that covers this particular generation, the experience of someone who left Vietnam under 10 years old and someone who did so during their teens can be drastically different. However, they all share a lot of similarities: their perception was partly influenced by that of their parents one way or another, they fled Vietnam under chaotic condition and they were thrown into a new culture without much preparation. All of these factors contribute to the characteristics of this special generation, something I will discuss in the rest of this chapter.

“‘The Uprooted’ and ‘Disoriented’”

Studies on members of the 1.5 generation of immigrants usually describe this particular generation with terms like “being in the limbo,” “torn between the two cultures” without thoroughly and adequately explaining the causes of such states that they are caught in.⁴⁰ With that being said, I am aware that there are scholarships that examine those causes such as the study by Handlin and Roberge that I discussed earlier. Despite the irrelevances I have mentioned in the previous parts of this chapter when those studies are employed to explore the experience of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans, they provide very useful guidelines for a better understanding of the causes of their present state. I find their discussion on the 1.5 generation being “uprooted” and “disoriented” very compelling and applicable in the case of the Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation.

For one interviewee, Tu Nguyen, a refugee who left Vietnam at the age of thirteen, fonder memories of Vietnam pervade her thoughts. However, these suffered from the obstruction as well as the confusion of fleeing from the security of her surroundings. Nguyen recounted, “When I was in Vietnam, I still had it pretty good. I didn't worry about where the next meal was coming from. We were living off our savings and I guess my parents were still doing okay.” Nguyen's recollection of a routine and content lifestyle as a child in Vietnam reflects the lives of many Vietnamese children prior to the recent war in Vietnam. However, the juxtaposition of post-war terror, chaos and destruction with the innocence and security of a child's world only produces more turmoil and confusion in their experiences. Instead of retaining images of school

yards, classrooms or even life within the safety of home, Nguyen's post-war memories of Vietnam come from behind the walls of a prison camp:

My dad was not allowed to live with us. He had to spend five years in re-education camps and political detainees' camps. So they could see more politics involved. Me, I thought it was senseless and I thought it was unnecessary and I turned resentful at the fact that I had to leave because I had it pretty good anyway. I couldn't see the bigger picture like my parents did... they just wanted to get over here and have political freedom to start over again. So that's just the price they have to pay. Whereas I thought that was unnecessary, because I didn't see the worst in Vietnam. I thought we could still live a good live in Vietnam, so there was no sense... it wasn't like there was no sense, but I wish I didn't have to be uprooted. I wish I didn't have to be put through six months of transferring from one place to another, living in rat infested and polluted camps... all those subhuman conditions. I didn't think it was necessary.

The fact that she was not old enough to truly understand the potential personal impacts of politics on her life merely exacerbated Nguyen's situation by intensifying the experience of a sudden and drastic shift in living conditions. In addition, alienation from the harsh realities of the war also left her susceptible to the shattering of peaceful childhood images as she possessed little awareness of her potentially precarious position. This culminated during the moments when she was severed from her original lifestyle and stability of her surroundings, as well as from her parents. Nguyen's thoughts at the time of her final months in Vietnam reflect the questions that almost any older child at her age would pose, the most important one probably being "why?" However, not all Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation possess such rich memories of

their lives in Vietnam because they left at a younger age. BaoAnhNguyen remembers only a small segment of her life in Vietnam, “The only memories that I have are of Catholic school, nuns, getting locked in the closet because I talked too much! I don't remember much at all, really, just catholic school.” Even BaoAnh's memories of leaving Vietnam consist of scattered images painted by the stories told by her mother and father. However, Bao's memories remain blurred, because perhaps the age at which she left Vietnam was one in which she was too young to recall much of her experiences. The chaos of fleeing Vietnam under such quick and confusing conditions could also have blurred these memories. In either, or both, cases, BaoAnh fits into the category of the Vietnamese American 1.5 generation, because she possesses certain experiences from Vietnam.

In short, being “uprooted” and how it affects members of the 1.5 generation in their self-identification process have not really been paid much attention to in studies of Vietnamese Americans in general and those of the 1.5 generation in particular, which in turn informs another “forgotten” aspect of narratives about this particular generation. Besides, the failure of some members of this generation, especially the younger ones as indicated above in the case of BaoAnh, to reconstruct their memories due to their young age at the time they left Vietnam contributes to the “forgotten” aspect of these narratives.

Besides being uprooted, disorientation became a banal reality for many 1.5 generation children who had no choice but to endure the refugee experience directly before and after leaving Vietnam. As mentioned earlier, this notion of disorientation also existed for late nineteenth century European immigrants. However, the chaos and confusion for Vietnamese refugees differs because this group faced imminent dangers and often fled their home country without any possessions or knowledge of their destinations. This intensified their disorientation and left more

questions to be answered once they settled within their new and unknown destinations. For the 1.5 generation, disorientation was worse than that of their parents, because they often followed their disoriented parents without the knowledge of the latter's plans or intentions. This sense of certainty which often depended on parental assurances did not exist in as strong a manner as it did prior to the Vietnamese evacuations. This, in turn, created an added and increased sense of disorientation for these refugee children. As well as affecting younger children, disorientation even pervaded throughout the experiences of the older refugee 1.5 children, as illustrated in Hao Truong's case. For Hao Truong, the first months of arriving to and adjusting to life in the U.S. posed a circumstance of such confusion that they obscured this segment of her life.

“Disorientation” was even the specific word with which Hao Truong used to convey the general context of her initial resettlement in America. Aside from this, with the exception of parental support, alienation from her peers and relatives reinforced this feeling of disorientation for Hao Truong, because nothing around her appeared familiar. Although many factors may have contributed to this confusion, this results in the fact that these 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans often fail to recollect or reconstruct their experiences in such a way that the question of veracity is unasked.

A war ended, memorials were built to commemorate the deceased and the defeat of the war. In so many ways, by choosing to remember the dead and the defeat, in the process the Vietnamese Americans in Orange County also choose to forget some aspects of the lives of the living, including the struggles of a generation to find their own identity in a new land – those of the 1.5 generation. Like the boat people in the poem I cited in the epigraph of this chapter, narratives by and about the members of the 1.5 generation are buried and lost somewhere in the

maze of remembering and forgetting in both Vietnamese and American cultural memories only to be revealed by themselves in this chapter as stories of the “uprooted” and “disoriented.”

¹Arthur Danto, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *The Nation* (1985).p.152.

²Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).pp.7-8.

³Ibid.

⁴Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1987).p. 24

⁵Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979]).p.79

⁶Ibid.

⁷William T. Liu, *Transition to Nowhere: Vietnamese Refugees in America* (Nashville Charter House, 1979). p.79.

⁸ According to Chan's note, the U.S. attorney general's parole authority is delineated in section 212(d)(5) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended on October 3, 1965, 8 *U.S.Code* 1182 (d)(5), which provides that “the Attorney General may in his discretion parole into the United States temporarily under such conditions as he may prescribe for emergent reasons or for reasons deemed strictly in the public interest any alien applying for admission to the United States, but such parole of such alien shall not be regarded as an admission of the alien and when the purposes of such parole shall, in the opinion of the Attorney General, have been served the alien shall forthwith return or be returned to the custody from which he was paroled and thereafter his case shall continue to be dealt with in the same manner as that of any other applicant for admission to the United States.” Normally, only individuals are admitted under parole. However, the Indochinese was admitted as a group; they were also permitted to adjust their status from “parolee” to “permanent resident” after two years on U.S. soil. For further explication, see Marvin Samuel Gross, “Refugee-Parolee: The Dilemma of the Indochina Refugee,” *San Diego Law Review* 13, no. 1 (1975): 175-91.

⁹Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 generation : stories of war, revolution, flight, and new beginnings*, Asian American history and culture (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006).p.62.

¹⁰ U.S. Congress, House of Representative, Committee on International Relations, Special Subcommittee on Investigations, Hearings: “The Vietnam-Cambodia Emergency, 1975, Part III – Vietnam Evacuation: Testimony of Ambassador Graham A. Martin,” January 27, 1976 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976.)

¹¹Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 generation : stories of war, revolution, flight, and new beginnings*.

¹² The chaos was captured in the footage of *The Fall of Saigon*, a documentary film made by the Discovery Channel to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of that event.

¹³Frank Spepp III, *Decent Interval: The American Decade in Vietnam and the Fall of Saigon*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1977). discusses the “delusions” and “fantasies” that shaped U.S. policies in Vietnam and criticizes the CIA for failing to protect its own agents there, especially those of Vietnamese ancestry and for not shredding all its classified documents before leaving.

¹⁴Barry Wain, *The Refused: The Agony of the Indochinese Refugees* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981). p.38.

¹⁵Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation : Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. p.64

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ According to William J. Duiker, the Vietnamese Communist government then knew that the million or so ethnic Chinese living in the southern half of the country had, for centuries, dominated rice milling and wholesale and retail trade. Even though they stood in the way of the country's intended socialist transformation, to remove them abruptly would severely disrupt the distribution system and cause economic chaos. Besides, although the government issued new currency in 1975, it set no ceiling on how much of the old currency people could exchange for the new, so those with money, gold and other valuables could still hoard them. The black market in Western-manufactured goods continued to flourish in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). For more detailed discussion, see William J. Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon*, ed. Gillian Berchowitz, Monographs in International Studies (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989).

¹⁹Nayan Chandra, "Towards Socialism - On the Double," *FEER* (1976).

²⁰Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation : Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*.

²¹Ibid.

²² Interview #1 with Lan Nguyen.

²³ For details, see Richard and Victor Nee Alba, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

²⁴ Gail P. Kelly, "Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487, Immigration and American Public Policy (1986). p.143.

²⁵ David Haines; Dorothy Rutherford; Patrick Thomas, "Family and Community among Vietnamese Refugees," *International Migration Review* 15, no. 1/2 (1981). p.310.

²⁶ Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). p.21.

²⁷ Kelly, "Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s."p.143.

²⁸ Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. p.21.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See esp. General Accounting Office, Greater Emphasis on Early Employment, p. 51.

³¹ Kelly, "Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s."p.149.

³² Paul D. Starr and Alden E. Roberts, "Community Structure and Vietnamese Refugee Adaptation: The Significance of Context," *International Migration Review* 16, no. 3 (1982).

³³ XuanTruong Thi Nguyen, "Vietnamese American identities: How race, gender, and class are reflected in cultural, language, and technological barriers" (Washington State University, 2011).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Interview #2 with Lan Nguyen

³⁷ Ogbu and Gibson (1991) categorize immigrant minorities as voluntarily minorities. In their definition, "immigrant minorities have generally moved to their present societies because they believed that the move would lead to more economic well-being, better overall opportunities and greater political freedom" (p. 8). In contrast, he considers nonimmigrant minorities as involuntary minorities. Ogbu's defines "involuntary minorities are people who were brought into their present society through slavery or conquest of colonization. They usually resent the loss of their former freedom, and they perceive the social, political and economic barriers against them as part of their underserved oppression" (Ogbu & Gibson, 1991, p. 9). According to Ogbu, Vietnamese immigrants are considered as voluntary minorities. However, this is very problematic based on the experiences of many Vietnamese immigrant families through the five waves of migration. Many of these families had no choice but to come to the United after the Vietnam War. So, to say that they came here voluntarily is not completely correct. The line needs to be drawn and re-defined between voluntary and involuntary minorities.

³⁸ Mark Morgan Roberge, "Generation 1.5 Immigrant Students: What Special Experiences, Characteristics and Educational Needs Do They Bring to Our English Classes?," in *37th Annual TESOL Convention* (Baltimore, MD2003).p.9.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See Philip Kasinitz, "Re: Generation 1.5- Defining 1.5," <http://queensmuseum.blogspot.com>., and Mary Yu Danico, *The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawai'i*. (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

Chapter 3: Betrayal, Guilt and Reconciliation

Công cha như núi Thái Sơn
Nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra
Một lòng thờ mẹ kính cha
Cho tròn chữ hiếu mới là đạo con

Ca dao Việt Nam

“The debt we owe our father is as great as Mount Thai Son;
The debt we owe our mother is as inexhaustible as water flowing from its source.

We must repay their debt in order to fulfill our obligations as children.”¹

Vietnamese Proverb

I do not remember when I first heard this saying and how many times I have cited it growing up, but I know with certainty that it has been ingrained in my heart and mind, and possibly in those of many other Vietnamese people. The proverb encapsulates one of the most important Vietnamese/Confucius values/philosophies: filial piety – respect, obedience and care for one’s parents and elder family members, a philosophy that Vietnamese and other Asian cultures have lived by for centuries. It also informs the expectations in relationships among family members: filial relationships with family members and family harmony are among the highest priorities within the Vietnamese culture. However, this philosophy is drastically challenged in many Asian

refugees' families including those of Vietnamese Americans in their new homeland where this concept/value is not highly appreciated.

Families play a central role in the lives of many refugees by helping to organize, understand and make sense of daily experience.² Social anthropological studies of Vietnamese refugees in exile have addressed the role of families and extended kin after migration. The existence of new arrangements in family life, such as the presence of more distant kin, in-laws, and "fictive kin" was seen as a coping strategy for Vietnamese refugees in the United States.³ Extended family and other non-nuclear family households were found important in facilitating immigrant adaptation.⁴

At the same time, however, families are also sources of potential conflicts, especially between parents and children because "immigration usually involves major changes in parent-child relationships."⁵ Several studies have shown that the relations between immigrant parents and their children are vulnerable to the risks commonly associated with immigration, especially during adolescent years. On the one hand, during adolescence, children become more cognitively sophisticated and think differently about what their parents can and cannot control in their lives.⁶ This developmental shift is compounded by the process of acculturation for immigrant adolescents, making them more likely to downplay their parents' values and modes of behavior and adopt values and modes of behavior from the new society.⁷

Immigrant parents, on the other hand, may resist change in their traditional values. Some scholars suggest that despite years of living in the country of resettlement, many immigrant parents preserve their ideas about child-rearing, their expectations, norms, rules, and beliefs.⁸ These study results suggest that family values that center around household chores, family obligations, and family roles in particular remain stable regardless of the length of resettlement.

For adolescents, however, the length of time in the new country can have a significant impact on their acceptance of traditional family values.⁹

Similarly, in acculturation research, a number of studies have addressed the intergenerational relationship between immigrant parents and their adolescent children. As a point of departure, researchers often stress that adolescents typically seek a new cultural identity. Young people are exposed to cultural values belonging to the country of resettlement by attending school. They also obtain fluency in a language new to them and socialize with young people from the country of resettlement. On the other hand, parents are mostly portrayed as lagging behind their children in strivings to obtain cultural competence, language proficiency, and access to the labor market. Parents are described as clinging to cultural values belonging to their country of origin and developing cross-cultural competencies at a slower pace than their adolescent children.¹⁰

Southeast Asian adolescents who grow up in the United States, however, tend to be influenced by values of individualism, and self-expression. Therefore, “traits such as conformity, obedience, and an orientation toward the collective good are perceived as less valuable.”¹¹

Through my informants’ narratives, I also found that one of the characteristics that define them as members of the 1.5 generation is their struggle to maintain a relationship with their parents/elders – the 1st generation. As a result, tensions in relationships have become the highlights of their stories. Over all, my informants expressed difficulties in maintaining a relationship with their parents/elders while trying to adapt themselves to the new culture – American, which reinforces previous studies on parent-child relationships among refugees. Therefore, as a strategic move towards maintaining those relationships, themes such as betrayal, guilt and reconciliation were brought up in their narratives as a way to say that they are still

Vietnamese despite the betrayals they had with themselves and their parents/grandparents, it is the fact that they feel guilty that matters. That feeling of guilt shows that their efforts to reconcile with their families are presented as evidence of their willingness to maintain those relationships and as proof of their being Vietnamese.

What I found in their narratives that I think can be useful in understanding the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans, however, is the process through which they construct their identity based on their relationships with their parents at different stages in their life. The way this chapter is organized derives from the patterns that my informants constructed their narratives. As a researcher of immigrant narratives, I respect and learn from the narrators' way of presenting them. In narrating their stories of themselves as children growing up in the United States, the majority of my informants constructed a three-fold chronicle that highlights the stages as well as the characteristics of each stage in their relationship with their parents, which in turns partly define them as members of the 1.5 generation. The three stages through which most of my informants tried to find their own voices while balancing it with meeting their parents' and, in a few cases, relatives' expectations and fulfilling their filial piety towards them include: betrayal, guilt/remorse and reconciliation. These stages cover their adolescent and adult years, which, in my opinion, provide a more nuanced understanding of the parent-child relationships among immigrants in general and Vietnamese Americans in particular. In the following pages, I am going to lead us through those stages within their narratives while trying to answer the following question: In what ways does the effort to maintain a relationship with their parents define the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans? In the process, I will also discuss my identity in the field work and how it shapes my presentation of the 1.5 generation in this chapter.

Betrayal

I was introduced to Nguyen by one of my key informants who attend the same church as Nguyen. A woman of forty five, Nguyen appears to be much younger than her age and insisted I call her as sister. She was very cheerful and friendly and offered to let me interview her as soon as she heard about my project. We ended up going to her house right after the mass we attended together on a Sunday afternoon. The very first impression I got upon entering her home was a sense of familiarity. Having been in the United States for over four years, I found myself “at home” again in her living room. Like a lot of Vietnamese houses, the focus of the living room is an altar on which photos of the deceased are displayed. Beside the photos, there usually is a vase of white lilies in memory of the dead. Therefore, I was not surprised to have found a vase of white lilies on the altar in her home beside the photo of her mother. At one point in our conversation, Van Nguyen told me that it was her mother’s favorite flower and despite the fact that white lilies are very expensive there, she would display it for her mother because she “[had] betrayed [her] mother in so many ways, and this is the least [she] can do for her [mother] now.” I was particularly struck by Nguyen’s use of “betray” and “betrayal” in her narratives to talk about her “failures” to “be a good daughter to [her] mother” only to find myself encountering this over and over again in many other narratives by my other informants. At the same time, her remark on “betrayal” reminds me of my own possible “betrayals” as a researcher studying and representing my own community and my own position in the matrix of betrayals that I consider myself to be a part of.¹²

In retrospect, I was caught in a very complicated web of relationships in which betrayals are revealed or triggered/initiated by being in a conversation in a particular moment, by asking particular questions, by encouraging particular story lines to be narrated and by representing

them once again in this project. Therefore, I think it is critical that in addition to discussing my informants' stories of their betrayals, I should address my identity as a woman and an insider trying to do my research about my own community with feminist oral historical practices and the betrayals from my part.

I came into the field as a graduate student/researcher in American Studies, a Vietnamese studying in America, a married woman, a mother of a 5-month-old daughter. I identify myself as both an insider and outsider of the Vietnamese communities in Westminster and Garden Grove, California. As a Vietnamese being in the United States for over 5 years, I see myself as an insider because I have a lot in common with my informants. I speak both Vietnamese and English. I am exposed to both Vietnamese and American cultures. Besides, I am a mother, which helps me relate to a lot of my informants who are parents themselves. At the same time, I consider myself an outsider because of many differences between my informants and myself. In terms of age, I am younger than all my informants, which also means that I do not have the direct experience they went through: the Vietnam War. Moreover, although I have been in the United States for over 5 years, my experience as an international student is very different from those of my informants who are U.S. citizens. Culturally speaking, although I am living in the United States, I identify more with Vietnamese culture, whereas my informants may have a more complicated process of identification.

My identity as described above gives me more advantages than disadvantages in the field. Being a Vietnamese woman and a mother give me easier access into the community which allows me to get information more quickly from my informants; it also helps me establish rapport with my informants more smoothly. Since my daughter Cathy was still very little and clingy when I did my field work, I often brought her with me when I did my interviews. I noticed

that whenever she was with me, I seemed to be able to conduct my interviews with more confidence and ease. For the most part, I was welcomed with their open arms. In Vietnamese culture, being married and having children give people a sense of maturity, which in turns gives people more respect from others. At the same time, having a little child seemed to help me gain a lot of sympathy from my informants, which usually resulted in more intimate conversation starting with child rearing difficulties and lessons about parents-children relationship.

My age compared to my informants' also gives me a lot of benefits in the field. Being younger automatically puts me in the position of listening in the conversation and as a result, a lower position in the power hierarchy. In Vietnamese culture, experiences are highly valued and thus, the elder have more to tell the younger and the younger are supposed to listen in order to show their respect. At the same time, that very insider status and my age put me in situations where I have to seriously reexamine my own power position in the field because those factors often times lead to unintentional betrayals from my part to the community. Because of my age, I was often treated by my informants as their children or nieces, and what my informants told me is more of a lesson that the elder try to teach the younger people than a one-on-one interview. At the same time, the fact that I am from Vietnam put myself in a rather unique situation in the sense that, to a lot of my informants' parents whom I happened to meet and talked to in the field, I was, in many ways, the embodiment of the culture they still embrace and cherish. As a result, I got to be someone they confide in with stories that even their children (in these cases, they are my informants) do not get to hear. In retrospect, I feel like I betrayed my informants when I let that happen. On the outside, I did not seem to have had any power. It seemed like what I got to hear was at the mercy of my usually elder informants. However, as a researcher, I then start to realize that I have my own power while reconstructing the narratives I got to hear and choosing

what to include and what to leave out from the narratives. That power, however, did not expose itself in the field, which to me is a form of betrayal that many researchers have to be aware of and have discussed. All of these conflicts that I encountered in the field regarding my own identity have been addressed by feminist scholars such as Visweswaran, Judith Stacey, Naheed Islam, Sherri Tucker, and many others.

Kamala Visweswaran looks at historical conceptualizations of feminist oral historical practices based upon pretenses of unity and essentialism by noting, “Notions of sisterly identification abound, and feminist ethnography continues to traffic in intimate forms of address, despite Ann Oakley's (1981) and Judith Stacey's (1988, 1990) cautions about the dangerous ground between intimacy and betrayal.”¹³ As suggested, Judith Stacy’s article “Can there be a Feminist Ethnography?” questioned early feminist claims of connection and identification between researchers and interviewees:

Like a good deal of feminism, ethnography emphasizes the experiential. Its approach to knowledge is contextual and interpersonal, attentive like most women, therefore, to the concrete realm of everyday reality and human agency. Moreover, because in ethnographic studies the researcher herself is the primary medium, the “instrument” of research, this method draws on those resources of empathy, connection, and concern that many feminists consider to be women’s special strengths and that they argue should be germinal in feminist research. Ethnographic method also appears to provide much greater respect for and power to one’s research ‘subjects,’ who, some feminists propose, can and should become full collaborators in feminist research.¹⁴

Through explorations of her own field research experiences, Stacy engaged a core concept of the potential for “betrayal” of interviewees and “wonder[ed] whether the appearance of greater

respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation.”¹⁵ She goes on to problematize the presumed alliances between feminist researchers and interviewees, “The majority of feminist claims about feminist ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research, however, continue to presume that [the irreconcilability of Otherness, believed present in research *by men about women*] occurs almost exclusively woman-to-woman. Thus feminist researchers are apt to suffer the delusion of alliance more than the delusion of separateness and to suffer it more, I believe, than do most reflexive ethnographers.”¹⁶

In the same line of thought, in “Telling Performances: Jazz History Remembered and Remade by the Women in the Band” oral historian Sherrie Tucker questions tendencies in feminist oral history and ethnography to claim close identification with interviewees as a supposed means of side-stepping the distanced objectivity of classical anthropology:

Usually, as in this case, while it is the narrator who tells the tales during the interview, it is the historian who decides which segments will serve as "something to talk about," who then decides how to talk about them, and in what context. The realization that we are not merely benevolent megaphones for "letting women speak for themselves" has sent many a feminist researcher into crisis. While I have certainly lost sleep over this, myself, I am ultimately happy to be rid of the fantasy that it is possible for a person to be a conduit. The conduit model fails to notice differences between women (not to mention differences between women and conduits). The assumption that I can be a conduit, channeling voices of jazzwomen to written history, depends upon an assumption that jazzwomen are merely conduits to lived history. Neither assumption seems suitable (or feminist) to me.¹⁷

Both scholars here question earlier feminist claims to positive values attached to proximities

between interviewers and interviewees, as well as argue for a greater awareness of differences, failures, and dis-identifications between researchers and interviewees. Finally, Visweswaran continues this thread by arguing,

Contemporary feminist ethnographers have been largely unresponsive to feminist challenges to gender essentialism, relying upon gender standpoint theory, which erases difference through the logic of identification. Yet if we learn to understand gender as not the endpoint of analysis but rather as an entry point into complex systems of meaning and power, then surely there are other equally valid entry points for feminist work. Gender is perhaps best understood as a heuristic device and cannot be understood a priori, apart from particular systems of representation. To mistake the category for the reality is to create gender as sociologism, reducing it to a male/female dichotomy mistakenly constituted in advance of its operation in any system of social representation.¹⁸

By exploring specific ways in which feminist scholars have critically engaged, perpetuated, and/or questioned essentialist constructions of gender, we see multiple conceptualizations of gender, of the category of ‘woman,’ of feminisms, and feminist methods. As Visweswaran here suggests however, feminist ethnography or oral history need not claim to be, as has been previously argued, uncritically by, about, and for women, but rather, a lens through which to engage “complex systems of meanings and power.” In many ways, this is the school of feminist ethnography that I find the most useful for my own work. I believe that the flexibility and the vast applicability of this method allow me to explore the complexity of identity representation process of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans.

Taking about the insider status, what happens when the ethnographic “others” are from the same society and are members of the same race or ethnicity, and class background as the

ethnographer? There has been a debate among ethnographers about conducting fieldwork with informants who are of the same race or ethnicity as the researcher. Quite a few scholars assert that insiders are more likely to be cognizant and accepting of complexity and internal variation, are better able to understand the nuances of language use, will avoid being duped by informants who create cultural performances for their own purposes, and are less apt to be distrusted by those they study. Some assert that ethnic insiders often have an easier time gaining access to a community similar to their own, and that they are more sensitive to framing questions in ways that respect community sensibilities.¹⁹ Many concur that ethnic insiders are often capable of creating a more comfortable atmosphere for the informants during their interviews, resting on common understanding.

Others, however, observe that being a member of a subordinated group under study carries particular problems and creates personal and ethical dilemmas for social scientists on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, political sympathies, or even personal foibles. Maxine Baca Zinn, for example, found that being an insider woman conducting ethnographic research with Mexicans Americans meant having to continually negotiate her status, since members of the community being study often made assumptions about her intents, skills, and personal characteristics. She reminds us that insider researchers have the unique constraint of always being accountable to the community being studied. Along with the cooperation engendered by one's insider status comes the responsibility to construct analyses that are sympathetic to ethnic interests and that will somehow share whatever knowledge is generated with them, as she puts it: "These problems should serve to remind us of our political responsibility and compel us to carry out our research with ethical and intellectual integrity".²⁰

To continue this thread, in “Research as an Act of Betrayal: Researching Race in an Asian Community in Los Angeles,” Naheed Islam notes how insider status poses the dilemmas we have to face as researchers studying our “own” community. She notes on her study of racism in her Bangladeshi community,

[...] a Bangladeshi scholar documenting the experiences of her “own” community faces a critical responsibility. By outlining the contours of the racial ideology of Bangladeshi immigrants I risk being viewed as a traitor within my ethnic community. My very insider status allowed me to participate in and overhear conversations that routinely included racist views. This price of my inclusion in the community was to leave racist discourses uncontested. Should I reveal this “dirty laundry” once I have completed my research? By doing so, will I be distancing myself from and claiming to be better than the rest of “my community”? The history and experiences of the Bangladeshi community in the United States are yet undocumented. Should its introduction be “overshadowed” by the racist discourse the community reproduces? How should I present a marginalized community within and through my work?²¹

While being an insider gave Islam the opportunities to integrate into the community and “overhear” what she calls as the “dirty laundry,” that very status raises the question of how to present her findings in such a way that is beneficial to her community and politically right to her research. Here Islam has the same concern about constructing analysis that is sympathetic to ethnic interests that Zinn mentions, but pushes it a little further by proposing that either silencing the racism reality within her community or revealing it is an “act of betrayal”. In a way, the researcher is trapped between the interest of her own ethnic community and her political commitment. As she puts it,

If I sanitize and silence parts of my research that challenge the Bangladeshi community's image of itself and its role in perpetuating racism, I betray my commitment to struggle against racism. Describing the process by which Bangladeshi reproduce racism and racist ideologies need not negate a presentation of the oppression Bangladeshi themselves face, and vice versa. Silencing either way may be viewed as an act of betrayal.²²

In many ways, while being an insider brings certain advantages to researchers, that very status poses more dilemmas for them in the field work. Inherent in Zinn and Islam's concern is a reminder that one has to constantly identify and reexamine his/her positionality in order to not overlook obstacles that might arise in the process. While I totally agree with Zinn and Islam on the necessity to be vigilant of one's own insider status and to be responsible for the community we study, I would even go further to argue that one should be held accountable for their roles in initiating and revealing those instances of betrayals while studying their own community.

To borrow what Visweswaran stated, this analysis of betrayal is "not a philosophical point about the perversity of information retrieval, nor is it intended as a fable about my loss of innocence as a feminist researcher. It is an attempt to locate myself in a field of power (the West) and in the production of a particular knowledge (about the East). It is an effort at "accountable positioning" (to use Donna Haraway's term), an endeavor to be answerable for what I have learned to see, and for what I have learned to do."²³

So many times in the field, I found myself caught in a matrix of betrayal: the betrayal of my informants' self-betrayals, theirs against their parents in their narratives, their parents' betrayal against their own family secrets and my own betrayal in accounting the betrayals I encountered, and in many cases, like I have mentioned before, the betrayals enabled to take place by myself. In the following pages, I am going to tell stories of betrayals, stories that partly define my informants' identity and mine as a researcher.

Self-betrayals

When it comes to maintaining relationships with their parents or elder members in the family and fulfilling their filial piety, a lot of my informants concur that in many ways, they set themselves up and are set up for failure for several reasons. On the one hand, being the children of Vietnamese refugees, many of them learn that there are expectations to be met, and that there are sacrifices by their parents, especially their mothers to be recognized. And one of the ways to be “good children” is to be obedient to their parents and respect them. On the other hand, changes that the children have to deal with both inside and outside the families in many ways contribute to the obstacles they have in fulfilling their filial piety to their parents.

Van Nguyen who came to the United States when she was eight years old recounted her struggles adolescent years,

I have several problems as an Asian American, one of which is to meet the expectations from my parents. Most Asian parents expect a lot from their children because they have made so many sacrifices to bring their children to the United States. My mother does not make many demands on me but she does have high hopes for me. I told myself that I cannot let her down because she has suffered so much and worked so hard. She works twelve hours a day, five days a week, in a sewing factory. I cannot even image myself sitting in a chair for twelve hours a day.

Van Nguyen’s story about her mother being the breadwinner in the family instead of her father and her trying to meet her mother’s “high hopes” tell us a lot about the Vietnamese families in the new land. Nguyen, like many other informants, recognizes the difficulties and struggles that their parents and especially their mothers have to go through in the new land. More importantly,

they also realize the changes within their families, particularly the roles that their parents play in the households and how those changes affect their attitude towards their parents. While recognizing their parents' hardships pressures them to be "good children" to their parents, changes in and outside the families and their effort to adapt to those changes prevent them from being the "good children" they want to be, thus self-betrayal.

Arriving in the U.S. for quite a long time, only recently have Vietnamese women been recognized as a vulnerable group that need special programs and attention. In addition to their poor mental health resulting from the traumatic experiences during their escapes, many Vietnamese women also suffer emotional problems during their adjustment in the United States. At the same time, however, the change also has also brought about many opportunities for them. There have been several studies that focus on the problems faced by Vietnamese women in the process of resettlement as well as the result of their effort in the process; emphasizing particularly the economic adjustment, marital status and domestic violence and finally language and culture adjustment. All of these factors are important for Vietnamese American women in establishing their status both in their family and the new society, which in turn affect their children in many different ways.

Vietnamese women coming to America have experienced fatigue, humiliation, and anger, and continue to face new obstacles here.²⁴ Their main problem is feeling helpless and ineffective in coping with reality in this country. They are overwhelmed with the needs of adjustment, especially with their roles in the family. For certain cases, the women are the head of the family because the husband was left behind, while in other cases, when husbands cannot find a job, the burden is shifted to the women's shoulders.

The employment of the Vietnamese wives places these women in a highly stressful situation because the traditional Vietnamese culture is deeply influenced by Confucian doctrine: authority of parent over children, husbands over wives, older children over younger ones. Confucianism also stresses that women have to be submissive: first to their fathers, then later to their husbands. In Vietnam, the women are expected to take care of the household, raise the children, and obey their husbands; even when the husbands die, they have to follow their sons. The paradox is, although most women in the past were primarily restricted to the home, some had to take outside jobs due to the continuing war in Vietnam. They had to make a living while their husbands were on the battlefields. When Vietnamese women come to America, more of them drift from their traditional roles in order to help the family financially. This has caused additional cultural stress. The employment of women brings out in the open the conflict between the traditional Vietnamese role of wife and mother, and the role of women in modern American society. Now able to contribute money to the family, the women feel they should have more power in the family than before.²⁵ This is reflected in Van Nguyen's story as well as in many other informants' accounts. The "high hopes" that Nguyen thought her mother had for her are also felt by a lot of other people that I interviewed from their mothers, which is a very interesting aspect that I observed among my informants' families. The mothers' struggles and their upward mobility in many ways make the children realize that they need to show their gratitude to their mothers. At the same time, the fact that their mothers became the supporters put a lot of strains on their relationship with their children.

Many informants talked about how their mothers' being away a lot from home somehow make them drift away from the family. Dung Tran, another informant told me,

When we came to America, I felt really sad. Each and every one of us in my family has our own world. I particularly found my mother's being away all the time the most difficult to deal with. In Vietnam, she stayed at home with us and I felt we were cared for. I know she had to work and supported us here, still ...

This is an indication that members of the 1.5 generation are exposed to conflicting factors that affect their attitudes towards their parents. According to a lot of my informants, much as they know they need to be grateful towards their parents, the lack of direct care from their parents partially makes them refrain from expressing it. At the same time, going through adolescence adds to the tension that have already so hard between them and their parents.

These drastic changes in the roles of Vietnamese women have disturbed many men as husbands. They cannot cope well with the changes in the deeply-rooted Vietnamese customs and traditions; they cannot easily accept their loss of dominance within the family, their declining role as patriarch of the family. The loss of their home in Vietnam appears to mean also the loss of men's authoritarian role within the family, which leads to a lot of issues, among those is domestic violence – an issue that a lot of my informants indirectly brought up in our conversations. In their opinion, this very reality is among many other factors that lead to their “escape” from the stressful family situations. Mindy Tran recalled,

It was hard to us children back then because our parents fought very often. I did not really know what was going on then, but now, looking back, I guess I know. The only we did then was to try to stay away from home when they [their parents] were there as much as we could.

The historical values of the Vietnamese family were not automatically discarded when the refugees arrived, and to be sure, many of the traditional values remain strong in Vietnamese-American communities. These values, however, were and continued to be tested not only by the trauma of the trip to America, but also by the American economic system which tend to intrude into the sense of Vietnamese family unity.²⁶ As suggested by Bui, resettlement in the United States has brought important changes to traditional Vietnamese life, economic opportunities for men and women and gender relation in the context of the socioeconomic structure and culture of American society. For Vietnamese women, life in the United States has provided them with economic opportunities to improve their family status relative to their husbands, who often have had a profound loss of social and economic status due to migration.²⁷ The husbands have not found it easy to use their working skills in America and consequently have to accept any available job. Approximately 65 percent of the Vietnamese refugees formerly working in white-collar professions have had to enter blue-collar professions in the United States, and then can no longer support their families as they did in Vietnam.²⁸ The man's loss of status and power, along with his downward mobility and self-esteem, has placed severe pressure on the traditional marriage relationship. An increase in spousal abuse, which is accepted to some degree in Vietnam, is a direct result of the stress marriage faces in the transition to a new, modern culture. Moreover, while women and work outside and contribute to support the family, they are not to forget their duties as wives and mothers. In this sense, they usually find themselves in a conflict between the traditional and the modern roles. It means that for Vietnamese American women, their economic contributions could not reduce their husbands' dominant position and abuse, but economic hardship could prevent abused women from leaving an abusive relationship.²⁹ It seems that women are trapped in between the two roles they have to take between the two cultures and

they finally become the victims of violence. In a typically traditional Vietnamese family, men are perceived to have the rights to “educate” the family according to whatever ways they see fit and that is considered to be private. According to Bui and Morash, the husband’s patriarchal beliefs play a significant role in wife abuse. However, there seem to be really good signs indicating that Vietnamese women have been aware of the situation and learned to cope with it thanks to many important factors in the new cultural context, which include: (1) culture’s intolerance of partner abuse, (2) financial independence, (3) education on relationship equality, (4) support system and (5) women role models.³⁰ This leads to the empowerment among Vietnamese American women and results in their personal intolerance of partner abuse. Bad news still is that a lot of Vietnamese women remain unchanged despite the fact that they have been exposed to those conditions and violence and abuse continue to be a major issue in Vietnamese American families. According to Kibria, the women’s status and power, however, are not great enough to transform gender relations in the Vietnamese immigrant community radically. While the economic resources of the women have risen, compared to those of the men, they are seen as too limited to sustain the economic independence of women from men, and so the women still continue to value the promise of male economic protection. Hence they are victimized with their financial dependence. Kibria argues that Vietnamese American women (and their children) walk an “ideological tight rope” – struggling both to preserve the traditional Vietnamese family system and to enhance their power within the context of this system.³¹

In that very struggle, children are often left to figure things out by themselves, and the lack of parental guidance as well as the pressure/yearning to have independence makes them defy their belief in filial piety, which then leads to self-betrayal.

Betrayals to parents – the price of freedom

According to Marino, many Vietnamese refugees view the increased rights the American society afforded Vietnamese youths as serious threat to parental superiority and as obstacles to raising children. The freedom that children gain in the United States serve to distance them from Vietnamese roots, and parents are distressed by their children's increased self-absorption and independence and their waning respect for elders. Usually, the responsibility is ascribed to women as grandmothers and mothers in the family. Vietnamese people have a proverb, "once a child is spoilt, it's his/her mother's responsibility, and once a grandchild is spoilt, it's due to his/her grandmother" This is really stressful for women, because they are facing at the same time to many problems causing by the differences in two cultural contexts. American freedom, which the refugees so desperately sought to obtain, was now serving to deemphasize Vietnamese culture among their youth. Parents, therefore, used the American culture's threat to their power to discipline their children as justification for keeping intact the sometimes oppressive Confucian tradition. At the same time, worries about their children's changing identity such as being Americanized, failing to speak Vietnamese are also of major concern.

Meanwhile, the children, caught in the parents' fear of losing Vietnamese culture, tried to break themselves away from it, and in a way, betray their parents' expectations.

Tuan Nguyen told me what happened the night she told her parents she wanted to stop attending the Vietnamese-language school after four years without really improving his command of the language,

That night, our house was filled with tension. We all went to bed early. I crawled into my only private space – my bed – and cried in anger and confusion. I felt completely alone. Part of me wanted to give up the fight and follow all of my

parents' expectations, while the other part wanted to find the real me, to do the things *I* [italics added] wanted to do and not what others expected of me. Up to that point, all I had done had been directed by other members of my family.

Whatever I wanted to do had to be approved by the entire family. That was really difficult for me because there was always at least one person who opposed my desire. It was so frustrating to try to please everyone. I asked myself, if I were to disobey them, would I then be considered a selfish person?

As I lay in bed, I thought of something one of my Dad's friends had confided to him: his friend was afraid that his children would send him to an old folk home as they went on with their lives. He thought they would probably visit him only on weekends. He warned my Dad how easily Chinese or Vietnamese children became Americanized and once they did, they would no longer care for their parents. They would totally become selfish, he said.

Despite his family's objections, Tuan Nguyen discontinued Vietnamese school. He said he felt he was mature enough to make such a decision. Tuan told me that at the age of fourteen then, he felt like an adult because of all he had been through. Not only was he working at a part-time job, but he had also long ago learned to go see the dentist or the doctor by himself. He cooked for his family, studied hard, and did not socialize. He did not feel like a normal teenager who still needed her parents' guidance. Thus, he thought he should be allowed to make decisions because he understood their consequences. Basically, during high school, he rebelled against all the expectations that his family and friends placed on him.

A lot of my informants also expressed their thirst for freedom and for their own individuality – a “space” for themselves. Henry Huan Ton, another recounted how he decided to join the Junior Reserved Officers’ Training Corps despite his family’s objection:

I joined Junior Reserved Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) because at home I had no space I could call my own and no space in which I could recognize myself as an individual. JROTC gave me a chance to gain insight into myself, my likes and dislikes, my hidden potentials – hidden skills and talents, and above all, my real personality. My family, however, disapproved my decision to join. They thought that JROTC reminded them of the Communists who had forced us to leave Vietnam. My green uniform especially troubled them. My father strongly discouraged my participation because he felt ashamed and disturbed as I would proudly wear my neatly pressed uniform in public. He could not grasp his head around the idea why I wanted to show my patriotism when the United States is not my “original” country. I also sensed that my military uniform brought back painful memories of the war and of my brother’s death.

Such an action is almost unimaginable in a traditional Vietnamese family. This rebellion, however, is completely understandable in the case of members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans who have to navigate between two very different cultures: Vietnamese and Americans.

Some of my informants, in an effort to obtain their independence, even went as far as to do everything their own way, including things that are crucial to their life and future which usually involves a lot of parental guidance in Vietnamese culture such as choosing a college/career or a partner. Han Truong, a secretary at a dentist office recalled,

The next step I took toward my independence was in my choice of which college to attend. I wanted to go to a college that would not be too close to Los Angeles, which would require me to live at home, but at the same time was not too far away so that I could visit my family on holidays. My parents wanted me to live at home and attend a local college, you know, Fullerton was where they thought I should enroll in. I was determined to have it my own way. I also wanted to prove to them that I could do much better, meaning I could get into a better school than the one they chose for me. As for my major, my parents wanted me to be a dentist - something they believe would ensure a better life for me in the future. I sought aid from my counselor and decided that I wanted to major in psychology.

Han Truong did not end up being a psychologist as she had planned; she is currently working as a front-desk person in a dentist office. She told me, “Close enough. I mean close enough to what my parents expected of me. I am not a dentist, but I work in a dentist office.” However, her decision to attend a different college and choose a different major did cause a lot of damage to her relationship with her parents as well as her own perception of who she really is – her identity. For a long time, she told me, during her college years, she hardly came home for a visit. She said,

At the beginning, I felt homesick and lonely because everywhere I saw unfamiliar faces and heard unfamiliar voices. Though I yearned to see the faces of my family members, I did not go home as often as I wanted because I could not allow them to assume that I had made a wrong decision. I did not want them to force me to return home. What frustrates me most was the loss of my identity. I often feel as if I do not know who I am. When people ask me what kind of food I like or what

kind of music I listen to, I do not have immediate answers because at home I would eat what my parents fed me or listen to whatever kind of music they wanted to hear. Now I have to make decisions about even trivial matters.

Although I fought for this freedom for so long, I am not sure I really enjoyed it. I felt being drifted away from what was familiar and it was scary that I could no longer recognize who I really am. I am torn between the “old” and the “new” me so many times.

In fact, I was baffled at how straightforward she was in her story when she talked about her confusion with the freedom she finally got. However, I realized later that it is a common feeling among my informants which then leads to the feeling of guilt, something I am discussing in the next section.

Meanwhile, Cindy Tran, another informant, told me about how she defied her parents' wishes for her to get married to a Catholic Vietnamese American. In her late forties, Cindy Tran no longer believes in marriage, and has already given up her struggle to find her own happiness. She told me she used to date when she was still in college and the majority of the people she dated were white Americans and not Catholic. Her parents who are very devout Catholics did not approve any of her relationships because they thought she would be better off marrying a Catholic Vietnamese American. She told me after so many quarrels and disagreement between her and the parents, sometimes she would date an American just to make them angry. Her parents tried to introduce a lot of Vietnamese American men to her in the hope that she would change her mind, but she said to them, “If I can't have it my way, you can't have it your way.” She then went on to explain why she decided to act against their parents,

You know, I was exhausted because I really wanted to have their blessing; the thing is I did not find Vietnamese American men suitable for me. They are just different, you know and I did not think anyone of them can make me happy. I am not a typical Vietnamese woman who would be submissive to her husband, but a lot of Vietnamese guys, I know, would not like that although they have been here long enough to change. This put a lot of stress on my relationship with my parents.

The thirst for freedom and the determination to find their own “space” drove many of my informants away from their parents and their traditional Vietnamese beliefs, which in turns mark them as a generation of “betrayals.”

Guilt

“Guilt” and “guilty” are terms that a lot of my informants brought up in our conversations. Guilt, in my interviewees’ narratives, was used to refer to the feelings they have after being able to make it their own way despite their parents’ objection, guilt was also used to talk about their repentance for the wrong deeds they thought they had done to their parents. But what exactly is guilt? And in what ways does guilt become a part of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans’ self-presentation?

Psychological theory is steeped in shame and guilt. Shame and guilt have figured prominently in theories regarding such important domains as the regulation of moral behavior and the formation of psychological symptoms.³² Although there has not been an agreement on a clear-cut definition of guilt, most scholars agree that there is a difference between shame and guilt. “The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In

guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but is not itself the focus of the experience.”³³ In other words, as June Price Tangy pointed out, the feeling of shame is an acutely painful experience because it is the entire self that is painfully scrutinized negatively evaluated. Such self-scrutiny leads to a shift in self-perception, which is often accompanied by a sense of shrinking, of being small, by a sense of worthlessness and powerless, and by a sense of being exposed. As such, shame is an overwhelming and debilitating emotion that often serves to paralyze the self, at least temporarily. Guilt involves a focus on a specific behavior that is negatively evaluated, somewhat apart from the global self. In other words, guilt does not affect one’s core identity or self-concept. In guilt, there’s a sense of tension, remorse and regret over the ‘bad thing done’. And this sense of remorse and regret often motivates reparative actions – confessing, apologizing, and somehow repairing the damage done.

As discussed in the previous section on betrayals, in the conversations with my informants, I did get to listen to many accounts of how the regulation of moral behavior is disrupted by betrayals. However, my intention in the following pages is not to provide an analysis of the guilt felt by members of the 1.5 generation towards their parents using a psychological framework; but rather, I would like it to be a place where members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans express themselves with their own stories of guilt. In many ways, by incorporating guilt in the construction of their narratives, my informants expose themselves to scrutiny and evaluation – thus experienced shame. At the same time, as the highlights of their narratives, their accounts of guilt are used as a strategy to represent their identity: by shifting the focus away from the self (shame), they strategically identify themselves by the actions.

For the majority of my informants, guilt set in after they had obtained what they wanted. For example, Cindy Tran, who refuses to get married to a Catholic Vietnamese American according to her parents' will talked about how she thought she failed to fulfill her filial piety to her parents by not doing what they wanted her to do. She told me, "I feel guilty that I have failed them. I feel guilty that I still make them worry about me at this age, you know. I should be settled down now with a husband and possibly kids and a home, being a real woman. The fact is, I am not, and I know that makes my parents really sad, especially my mom." While admitting to having upset their parents by not marrying one of the people her parents had introduced to her, Mindy Tran expressed her feeling of guilt as a way to say that she has realized her wrong doings and that it does matter that she realizes it. When I told her that her parents would be worried either way because it is what parents tend to do (I talked as if I am so experienced for my little daughter, Cathy, was only 5 months old at the time!), she told me that "there's a difference between sad worries and happy worries."

Similar to Mindy Tran, Tina Le Nguyen, a hairdresser's in Garden Grove, also expressed guilt, not towards her parents, but towards her grandmother whom she thought she left behind by coming to the United States on a boat in 1987. Nguyen told me her grandmother, who were her main care-giver when she was still in Vietnam, did not want her to leave because Nguyen was her grandmother's favorite. Her grandmother had been sick for two years at the moment of our interview. Nguyen told me that she felt "guilty because [she] cannot be there for [her] grandmother when she needs her most." Although Nguyen tried her best to make sure her grandmother had the best care possible, she still thinks it is unfortunate. She said,

Although I am now a U.S. citizen, someday I would like to go back and visit Vietnam because it is still my country. My grandparents are there, and I want to

go back to see my grandma who took care of us. She is in her late eighties now and has Alzheimer's. We hired two people to take care of her. She lives with my grandfather, but she doesn't know anybody, and she can't take care of herself or even feed herself. Somebody has to put food in her mouth, and if nobody watches her, she wanders off.

Nguyen showed me a photo of her grandmother which shows a woman with short hair and black teeth from chewing trau cau. With a solemn expression on her face, she continued,

It's too bad that when she has grandkids to send her money and take good care of her, she can't enjoy it. She doesn't even know about it. When we escaped from Vietnam, I could see that she was very sad that we were going to leave her. I don't say I could ever repay what she did for us, but I am sorry that she can't see her grandkids, can't see how well we have done and be proud of us so that she could say, "Wow, those are my grandkids!" Now she doesn't know anything.

Nguyen told me she felt "remorseful" for having left her grandmother behind, for not having been able to be there for her grandmother and especially for her current situation. In other words, she feels guilty for not fulfilling filial piety towards her grandmother who took care of her when she was young.

In a nutshell, the guilt that many my informants feel and incorporated in their narratives negatively defines them as a generation caught in circumstances that prevent them from appropriately regulating their moral behavior according to the Vietnamese tradition. At the same time, guilt positively defines them as a generation that learns to look back to their cultural root and attempt to make amends.

Reconciliation

If guilt is directly brought up in the narratives I was able to collect from my informants, reconciliation is something I observed by being with my informants outside the interviews. Very few of my informants directly talked about reconciliation with their parents, but it was implied in their actions. Reconciliation is a term I use to refer to what members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans and their parents (members of the 1st generation) do to maintain their relationship. My observation shows that reconciliation comes from and is made possible by both the parents and my informants, and similar to guilt, reconciliation defines members of the 1.5 generation as one that tries to make amends and to navigate successfully between cultures; which complicates the claims of other studies that people who migrate as children easily “acculturate.”³⁴

Looking back, I found my not driving when I was doing my field work as an advantage. So often, I would have an appointment with one of my interviewees in a café or so and would be offered a lift home by the person once they found out I was taking the bus. A lot of what I learned from them and their life in fact took place while I was in the cars with them and later in their homes every time I got invited and a lot of my observation on reconciliation happened in those circumstances, not during my interviews.

One of my informants, Hao Truong, offered to drive me to a Vietnamese supermarket when she found out I did not drive and that I needed to do grocery shopping. She told me she would stop by the place almost every day after work to buy food for her family, a habit she said she got from her mother. “That way I can have fresh food and a diversity of the dishes for the whole family throughout the week,” she said. The day we went, beside the food she bought for her family, she got some crabs and mussels for her parents. On the way back, Hao dropped by her parents’ apartment to drop off the food, something she said she does very often.

Hao told me her whole family used to share the house where she, her husband and their son are living now. Back then, when they first moved to California, her parents and her three siblings all cramped into their two-bedroom house in Garden Grove. As a family, they worked to pay for the mortgage. When her siblings have their own families, they moved out. Her parents, however, stayed with her until about three years before the interview when they decided to apply for housing assistance from the government. When they got accepted, they moved out leaving the house for her because she is the eldest daughter. Hao Truong thought that she somehow mistreated her parents by not having them stay with her. She said, "In Vietnam, this would never happen. I would love to have them with me as long as I can, but you know, things are not the way it is there." By "things are not the way it is there," Hao Truong was referring to the difference in family arrangement between what she observes in the U.S. and Vietnam. Traditionally, the parents would stay with their children until they die. If they have more than one child, a lot of time the children will take turn to take care of their parents.

In a way, Truong was telling me about her betrayals, at the same time, she showed her reconciliation in the act of bringing her parents food which expresses her care for them. She also talked about how she tried to go to church with her parents and be at their place as often as she could so that "they don't feel ignored or left out." As if to prove it, she invited my family to a dinner that her parents were going to be present. During the dinner I had a chance to meet her parents. To my surprise, her mother told me a lot of things I could not even dream of hearing simply because it was our first encounter. She talked about how she and her husband did not want to bother their children and how they think it's a normal thing to do here in the U.S., and how they would like to spend their time when they get really weak. "We have agreed with our kids that we will live in our apartment until one of us dies [either she or her husband]. Then they

can put the living one in a nursing home on one condition: they would bring their kids to see me or my husband during the weekend,” she said.

What Hao Truong’s mother told me brought my attention to the reality that the reconciliation was initiated by Hao Truong, but was made possible by their parents and that members of the 1st generation do change over time. Her mother told me that they – she and her husband - feel very lonely when their children have all grown up and have their own families. To keep themselves busy, they have become involved in several church activities. They go to church every single day, attend the choir for elder people and very active in many charity events. She told me: “It wears me out sometimes, I am almost seventy years old, and thank God, I am in good shape, but imagine, you have a lot to do, and you can’t do it all, and you feel exhausted. I can’t stop, however, because I know I will be bored to death. I don’t want to be like that, lonely and forgotten. When I am part of the church, at least I got to be with people like me, we share a lot of things and we understand each other and we support each other, and the most important thing is I have something to do.” In fact, Hao Truong’s parents did not really come up with their decision to be in the nursing home on their own. Their association with other elderly people in the church teaches them many things, among which is the fact that they are not alone in this situation, and that they have to change to maintain the relationship with their children.

Similarly, Mindy Tran – the woman who refuses to get married – has her own way to making amends to her mother. Although she has become a successful nurse and has her own home, Tran spends her weekend at her mother’s place with her dog to keep her mother’s company. “

I feel guilty. I could have agreed to marry one of those men my parents chose for me, and you know, I would have kids now and my mother can have someone to

play with or to take care of. I know she would love that. Although she has my nephews and nieces, but [sic] they are all in Michigan and hardly pay a visit to her, so I am trying my best. I do not want her to feel lonely. She is happy when me [sic] and my baby [her dog] are around. ”

Carolyn Hoang, who got married to an Iranian American against her parents’ will, has a different way to reconcile with them. She told me about how she met the man and “immediately fell in love with him.” She said that “[f]or the first time in my life I have seen this gorgeous young man with big beautiful eyes and long eyelashes. I found myself mesmerized and sinking into those eyes without being able to climb out. At that very moment, I knew he is the one.” Her parents, however, were not so convinced with his “charm.” He is a Muslim, and she is from a devout Catholic family with a very strong foundation. Despite her great love for him, she was not able to persuade them to accept him into the family. They ended of eloping, getting betrothed and settling down in California. She made contact to her family again after two years leaving the family and they finally reconciled. In order for that to happen, she taught Vietnamese to her husband and somehow that persuaded her parents, in her opinion. “He has never missed a single get-together at my parents’ place and he is their favorite son-in-law now.” Carolyn proudly told me.

However, I also observe that not all reconciliations happen without a grain of salt, especially on the part of the parents. In maintaining the relationship with their parents, members of the 1.5 generation have the concession from their parents, which in a way, requires changes to happen. Several studies on Vietnamese American families have noted that there is disintegration of the traditional family structure and loss of cultural values which have great psychological

impact on the elder.³⁵ The role of the elder is changing. Elders may no longer hold the traditional position of respect in the family. The younger generations of these families are quickly becoming assimilated into the American society and developing new sets of values. Holding onto cultural traditions may not be important to them. Caring for an older family member may not be a personal priority for many. The older adults, coming from a culture where elders are respected and cared for by the younger family members, often feel neglected and experience a kind of isolation from their own families. This estrangement in combination with the feeling of isolation from their own community as a whole can exacerbate feelings of depression and irrelevance, which can be categorized as abuse among the elders of immigrants.³⁶ All of these can be seen in the account by Hao Truong's mother and many other stories of my informants. At the same time, I noticed the hesitation from both parents and children to expose the deeper layers in their relationship.

Reflecting the teachings of Confucius, Vietnamese elders have a strong sense of family preservation and self-reliance. They feel an obligation to the family to confine family problems to the four walls of the home. They have faith in fate and filial piety, so disclosure of abusive or neglected situations can be regarded as bringing shame to the family. When compared to the losses of life during evacuation either by air or by boat, losses of identity, status, and family values, as well as the dislocations which they were compelled to live through, concern such as elder abuse were almost mundane and benign to these older immigrants.

In conclusion, the ramifications of the relationship between my informants and their parents derive from their effort to fulfill the filial piety, a crucial philosophy/value in Vietnamese culture and their thirst for freedom and self-determination, an important value in American culture. Torn between the two cultures and circumstances caused by immigration, members of

the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans, as adolescents, managed to maintain a somewhat turbulent relationship with their parents, a relationship that is highlighted by betrayals, guilt and reconciliation; a relationship that defines them as a very special generation that is forced to walk an “ideological tight rope.”³⁷

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¹⁰D Birman, "Measurement of the “Acculturation Gap” in immigrant families and implications for parent-child relationship," in *Acculturation and parent child relationships*, ed. & L. R. Cote M. C. Bornstein (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006).

¹¹ See S. S. Feldman, & Rosenthal, D. A, "The acculturation of autonomy expectations in Chinese high schoolers residing in two Western nations," *International Journal of Psychology* 25(1990). and C. L. Costigan, & Dokis, D. P., "Similarities and differences in acculturation among mothers, fathers and children in immigrant Chinese families," *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology* 37(2006).

¹² As I have mentioned in the introduction, although I am not Vietnamese Americans like my informants, I still identify myself as an insider when studying the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans

¹³Visweswaran, Kamala. “Histories of Feminist Ethnography.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 26 (1997), p. 614. pp. 591-621.

¹⁴ Stacey, Judith. “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?” *Feminism and Social Change: Bridging Theory and Practice*. Heidi Gottfried, ed. Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1996. p.89. pp. 88-101.

¹⁵Ibid, 90.

¹⁶Ibid, 95.

¹⁷ Tucker, Sherrie. “Telling Performances: Jazz History Remembered and Remade by the Women in the Band.” *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter - Spring, 1999), p. 77. pp. 67-84.

¹⁸Visweswaran, Kamala. “Histories of Feminist Ethnography,” 615-616.

¹⁹ For more details please see Romano, 1968; Paredes, 1977; Aguilar, 1988

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- ²⁰Zinn, Maxine B. "Field Research in Minority Communities: Ethical, Methodological, and Political Observations by Insider." *Social Problems*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1979), page 218. pp. 209-219
- ²¹Islam, Naheed. "Research as an Act of Betrayal: Researching Race in an Asian Community in Los Angeles." *Just Method: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*. Alison M. Jaggar, ed. Paradigm Publishers, 2008. p.480. pp. 471-480.
- ²²Ibid.
- ²³Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- ²⁴Nguyen Van Luu, *The Hardships of Escape for Vietnamese Women, Making Waves* (Boston, MA Beacon Press, 1989).
- ²⁵Kibria Nazli, "Power, Patriarchy and Gender Conflict in the Vietnamese Immigrant Community," *Gender and Society* 4, no. 1 (March 1990).
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- ²⁷Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*.
- ²⁸Luu, *The Hardships of Escape for Vietnamese Women, Making Waves*.
- ²⁹Hoan N. Bui & Merry Morash, "Domestic Violence in the Vietnamese Immigrant Community: An Exploratory Study," *Violence Against Women*, no. 5 (1999).
- ³⁰Nguyen Tuyen D., "Vietnamese Women and Domestic Violence: A Qualitative Examination," *The Qualitative Report* 9, no. 3 (September 2004).
- ³¹Nazli, "Power, Patriarchy and Gender Conflict in the Vietnamese Immigrant Community."
- ³²June Price Tangney, "Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Assessment of Shame and Guilt," *Behav. Res. Ther* 34, no. 9 (1996).p.741.
- ³³Helen Block Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971). quoted in Tangney, "Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Assessment of Shame and Guilt."
- ³⁴Darrel Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1979).
- ³⁵Ibid.
- ³⁶Ibid.
- ³⁷Kibria, *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*.

Chapter 4

Torn Among the Tensions

All of my family members joined me for dinner and said an early goodbye to me. I tried to laugh with them, but my heart was lost. My heart was not the only thing that was lost. I also lost myself somewhere between Vietnam and America.¹

America is becoming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.²

The former quote is Van Nguyen's words in one of the interviews I had with her when she talked about her first trip back to Vietnam. Like a lot of my informants, Nguyen expressed confusion when I asked her where home is and what it means to her. She cannot really decide whether it is America or Vietnam is her home.

The latter quote is from an essay by the American social critic Randolph S. Bourne (1886-1918) that went against the grain of "the widespread calls for active Americanization and conformity through the suppression of the articulation of ethnic identities."³ In the face of an international crisis, Bourne resisted the notion that immigrants were required to cast their lots into the American "melting pot" and to leave behind their culture of origin. Instead, Bourne sought to broaden Americans' understanding of their relationship to the rest of the world, advocating that "notions of "citizenship" were not necessarily bound by the nation-state but could also be conceived of in a larger, international perspective.

Although rarely acknowledged in the literature of the history of American foreign relations, one can argue that Asia has had an influence on the shaping of American culture before the Colonial period.⁴ In an essay tracing back the history of international relations between the United States and Asia, Scott Wong states,

After all, it was Asia that Christopher Columbus and many of those who followed were seeking, not the land mass that they encountered that eventually became known as the New World. This developing relation with Asia would be fundamental in shaping the labor and trade economy of the colonies of other European nations. The European, and later American, penetration into Asia and Asian markets contributed to the diasporic movement of people and capital throughout the Pacific and Atlantic cultural spheres.⁵

As observed by Wong, while Bourne was calling for a broader incorporation of European immigrants into the American polity, another group of aspiring immigrants were being denied entry into the country. In *Immigration Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996), Lisa Lowe points out that beginning in 1875, there began a gradual but steady restriction on the immigration of Chinese, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which denied the entry of Chinese laborers for ten years. Roger Daniels points out that the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first to deny the entry of any people based on their race and class, would be the “hinge on which all American immigration policy turned. [...] [I]t ended the era of free and unrestricted access to the United States.”⁶ This legislation would be strengthened and extended a number of times, only to be repealed in 1943 when the United States and China were allies during the Second World War. According to Lowe, the exclusion of Chinese set the precedent for the eventual prohibition of nearly all Asian immigration, with Japanese and Korean laborers excluded in 1907, South Asians in 1917, and Filipinos in 1934. The Immigration Act of 1924, with its prohibition of immigrants “ineligible to citizenship,” would effectively shut the gates to nearly all Asian immigrants until 1965.⁷

Despite exclusionary ideologies and legislation, Asian did manage to immigrate to the Americas, and they established productive and meaningful lives there, raising families and contributing to the building and growth of the Americas and the Caribbean. The process, however, was fraught with “displacement and ruptures in cultural continuity.”⁸ It is this very nature of the process that creates the contradiction between laying claim to America and the claims of diaspora which has been at the center of generational conflict between immigrant Asians who, until the late 1940s and 1950s, were ineligible for naturalization, and their American-born children.⁹ The conflict between Asian America and Asian diaspora is a central trope throughout Asian American literature.¹⁰ In the case of Asians in America, a discourse of diaspora that is deeply grounded in the notion of banishment, exile, and return to a real or imagined homeland must be juxtaposed with transnational practices in everyday life. The concept of transnationalism describes the practice among immigrants of establishing and maintaining kinship, economic, cultural and political networks across national boundaries, and the creation of multiple sites of “home.”¹¹ Transnationalism has been commonly identified with the globalization of late-twentieth century capitalism and the expansion of transportation, communications, and information networks, and in that respect it may be said to be a feature of modernity.¹² Other scholars, however, have shown that transnational practices of family formation, economic enterprise, and political organization have been characteristic of Asian communities in America since at least the nineteenth century.¹³ Indeed, more recently some historians, reflecting an earlier tradition of Overseas Chinese Studies have argued that Chinese settlement in North America should be understood as an extension of transnational Chinese social order.¹⁴ Other

scholars of contemporary patterns of Asian migration such as the anthropologist Aihwa Ong have emphasized the political and economic participation across national borders among highly mobile managerial and entrepreneurial elites in the globalized capitalist economy.¹⁵

Christopher Lee, in his critique of diaspora theories in *Displacement and Diasporas: Asian s in America* (2005) suggests that the rigors of the debates over diaspora have made it “an influential term” and have engaged scholars in diverse disciplines to rethink “Asian America”, but he views the debate over diaspora and its research implications for Asian America as still evolving and as being “structured along methodological divides.”

Amid the conversation in Asian diaspora theories, scholarship on Vietnamese diaspora has its unique characteristics due to the circumstances under which Vietnamese refugees came to America as laid out in Chapter 1, as well as the context in which Vietnamese in diaspora maintain their ties with Vietnam. For example, Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde in *Transnationalizing Vietnam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*, a book that covers twenty years of research to chronicle a community’s change provides a pretty thorough examination of the Vietnamese diaspora in America while highlighting the connection between Vietnamese in Vietnam and in diaspora. She writes,

Transnational links between people in Vietnam and in diaspora take place in the context of strong conflict between Vietnam and the United States. Added pressure then comes from anticommunist groups in the United States that keep the idea of a South Vietnam nation alive. Yet political ideology eventually took a back seat to family connections and responsibilities. Once communication was established between people who had left and those who remained, the top priority for most

oversea Vietnamese was the welfare of family back home and how to get resources to them to ensure their survival. The Cold War climate made it difficult for Vietnamese in Vietnam to communicate with Vietnamese in the United States, but these groups used mutually friendly nations as conduits for communication. The speed of these transnational connections relies heavily on globalization. Along with overarching nation-state obstacles, these factors are the context that makes the Vietnamese diaspora a unique subject of inquiry.¹⁶

Inherent in Valverde's observation is the complexities in the relationship between Vietnamese people in diaspora and those in Vietnam who present themselves in both political and economic forms that involve not only Vietnamese themselves but many other parties. In spite of successes in such acts of collaboration in an increasingly globalized world, Valverde warns us that the transnational experience of the Vietnamese diaspora is a struggle. "The term diaspora tends to evoke a sense of positive connections to a homeland," she says, "but sometimes a country and parts of its overseas populations do not have good relations; they are instead ideologically hostile to one another."¹⁷Verdre's warning speaks directly to what a lot of my informants talk about in our conversations about home and homeland – a part of how members of the 1.5 generation define themselves. Along with the tension that many of my informants face when it comes to identifying a homeland are the tensions regarding maintaining a relationship with their extended families and preserving Vietnamese culture in their households in America. All of these tensions are presented as struggles to stay Vietnamese while adapting to the culture of the mainstream.

Home – Is it Vietnam or America?

Where and what is “home”? Is the birthplace over there “home,” or is the place here where one currently resides “home”? While living and holding a citizenship “here,” how should one relate to “homeland” politics over there? Even I, as someone from Vietnam studying in America for a few years, began to wonder about it myself. Is my home in Hue, Vietnam where I was born and grew up in my parents’ house? Or is it in Lawrence, Kansas where I started my own family with my husband? I found myself asking that question when Cathy, our little daughter, shouted out loud, “Home!” when we got back from California after my second field trip. I realized how the concept of home, similar to the concept of identity, is situational and constructed, and it can be physical, political, social, or emotional; something I had never thought of before since Hue, the small ancient town in the middle of Vietnam had always been my home. Home as a physical space, a political space, a social space, or an emotional space has been experienced, challenged, and contested at different historical moments by different Asian groups in the Americas including Vietnamese Americans.

Vietnamese migrants who arrived in the United States in and after 1975 were identified as refugees. Newspaper, the electronic media, and the public opinion, as well as government officials and resettlement personnel, commonly referred to them as “Vietnamese refugees,” “Indochinese refugees,” or “boat people.” This seemed all natural, even if, as Indra has shown, the mere concept of “refugee” was not devoid of political connotations, since the definition of who was or was not a refugee had been constructed by politicians and policy makers.¹⁸ As for the vast majority of Vietnamese, they also willingly defined themselves as refugees (“Vietnamese,”

rather than “Indochinese”), given the fact that they had left their country (or refused to return there) in view of their non-acceptance of the current regime. In their case, too, this definition was political, because they considered their flight as testimony to their anti-Communist opinions.¹⁹

As a result, for first-generation Vietnamese Americans, many of them from military and political elites in Vietnam, “homeland” politics and anti-communist ideologies are central signifiers.²⁰

This, however, happened more than thirty years ago, and to members of the 1.5 generation who have become Vietnamese Americans and integrated within mainstream economic and social organization, but who generally preserve several aspects of their cultural and ethnic identity, the concept of “home” and “homeland” might be more complicated as suggested by my informants.

Hung Tran, who came to the U.S. at the age of fifteen as a boat person and currently owns a chain of nail salons in Garden Grove, revealed some very intriguing aspects of how Vietnamese in diaspora in general and Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation in particular, view Vietnam. These views tend to be colored by their personal and parents’ experiences with the Communist government at the time they left the country, which then further influences how they view the country when they come back for a visit. Frequently, their narratives are caught in the confusion of both affirmation and denial. On the one hand, most of my informants refer to Vietnam as their ‘home’ or ‘homeland’. On the other hand, many of them speak about the contemporary Vietnam and her people and her political system as if the country is completely foreign to them and so often, many of them show very negative reaction to what they experience during their visits to Vietnam. The following conversation is a part of one of the very quick interviews I had with Hung Tran in his main nail salon.²¹I had just asked him what he thought his life would have been different had the Vietnam War not happened:

Hung: So if, (laughing) I believe that if we, like ... we don't lose [sic] our country to the [sic] Communist, I would become a doctor now. I would not be nail guy like that. I definitely have a much better life now if we don't lose the country to the Communist. Come here I don't have a chance to study because life is hard; I have to work hard to feed my family. At least I can feed my family now. Back in Vietnam, with the Communist, I cannot even feed myself, you know. It was hard, very hard. I think of Vietnam every day. I live here, but my soul maybe, is in my country. I always think about my country. When I came to the U.S., I was 15 years old. I have one fourth of my life there already.²²

H: Have you bought things from here that remind you of Vietnam?

Hung: (looking around) No, nothing. Every time when I think about my country, I surf the internet, and yes, I read about my country. I don't have souvenir or something like that. All of the things that I have about Vietnam like, oh, what do I have?

(looking around) I, I don't have anything.

H: Have you been back to Vietnam at all?

Hung: Yes, I [sic] went back there three times. The first time when I went back there was the ... because my Mom, she [sic] want to, [sic] want to rest eh... over there. So I brought her back over there. And the second time when I go back to my country was her funeral. So after she passed away, I went back there for the second time. The third time is life, according to Vietnamese culture, we have like three years after your parents die, and you will go back one more time to visit their grave. After three years you Xa tang ... I don't know it in English. So that was the third time.

H: How did you feel when you went back there?

Hung: I don't know. I feel strange. People there are strange. They don't even recognize that I am a Viet kieu (Vietnamese oversea). They thought that I am some Taiwan guy or some Japanese guy or something like that?

H: Oh, really.

Hung: Yeah, (laughing) 'cause I didn't speak Vietnamese with them neither. I don't want to speak Vietnamese with them.

H: Why?

Hung: I ... because I don't want to be close with them, like I speak Vietnamese with my people, but not with the police guys or with the haiquan (custom officers) or something like that. Even they saw my name Hung Tran, they thought that I am some person from Taiwan or ... (laughing)

H: Oh, really? Interesting.

Hung: Yeah, they don't know that I am Vietnamese. I don't speak Vietnamese to them; I don't want to talk with them.

On the one hand, Hung Tran embraces Vietnam as his homeland or "country" in his own words, a place where he spent almost 15 years of his early life in. On the other hand, he denies being a Vietnamese by not speaking the language with certain groups of people -such as the people in custom or officials and letting his body to be misread as a foreigner. By splitting himself into "body" and "soul," Hung Tran made that conflict explainable.

This is something very common among my informants who tend to identify themselves with Vietnam as a physical entity and as a lost country politically, not with the contemporary Vietnam with a different political system and perhaps a different people (at least in their opinion). Indeed, in the conversations with my informants, Vietnam is used to refer to the South Vietnam prior to

1975, not the current reunited Vietnam; thus the tension they seem to have to deal with every time they are asked to talk about what and where they think is their home or homeland.

At the same time, in their narratives, what a lot of my informants experienced almost every time they went back to Vietnam, whether it's about the people or the country, is depicted in negative terms. Khanh Nguyen, a restaurant owner in Garden Grove told me about his first-hand witnessing of corruption at the airport upon entering Vietnam. He recounted the incident with disdain,

My father and I got home [Vietnam] four times. In 2000, I organized a trip of 11 people from my family and an American friend. This friend, he felt like he cheated the country because he didn't get involved in the Vietnam War, so he just wanted to go see Vietnam. He loves Vietnam. So we brought him home with us. He had a camcorder so he recorded everything, everywhere we went. We landed in Hanoi. I am telling you, people who worked there were, oh men When we got there, they opened all our luggage and they shouted, "oh, medicine, medicine. Whose is this?" I said, "That's my father's." I looked at my father, and my father just looked away, the same look I saw years ago. Anyway, I asked, "What's wrong?" Actually, he [the custom officer] was trying to create troubles and tried to get money, giving us hard time. So I asked my husband if he had a twenty dollar note, but he only had a ten. So the guy said that it was ok and asked us to put it in a jar or a bottle. Oh my, they had a bottle for the money, for the bribes [sarcastic tone]. And then, we were ok.

Nguyen even went further by adding, "In Vietnamese, dau tien (first of all) is tien dau (where's the money?)." "Bribing their way in" is something the majority of my informants refers to when they talk about the customs and many other bureaucracies they encountered when they visit

Vietnam and the majority of them make it sound like they are the targets because they come from America.

As I was typing these words, I got an email from one of my cousins, who are currently staying in Seattle. She actually forwarded the email she got from a Vietnamese American friend who came back to Vietnam in July 2012 and who apparently had a troubling experience with the customs. The email with photos attached as evidence is a warning for us (the recipients) “not to pack valuable belongings in the baggage” in order to avoid “being robbed in daylight.” I got this email not only because I am in her mailing list, but also because I am currently in America and planning to go to Vietnam soon. I was completely dumb-founded upon receiving it personally - I was embarrassed, angry and confused when looking at those photos and the message coming with them. And in a way, I felt like I was torn in between affirmation and denial like my informants, though in a different way. On the one hand, I knew for sure that people at international airports have all kinds of way to make extra money, including taking bribes and stealing from travelers. On the other hand, I wanted to deny it and to believe that the email was just a scam and the airports in Vietnam are well-regulated. For a second, it all made sense to me why Vietnamese Americans hate going through customs in Vietnam.

Another negative observation they all have is the widening gap between the rich and the poor in Vietnam. Hung Tran, owner of a nail salon recounted,

Oh, every time I go back there I can't recognize anything. They are [people in Vietnam] have changed a lot now. They very rich now, but the rich people they are richer, and the poor people they are poorer, or they are always like that. There is a big gap between the rich people and the poor people, very big gap. Most of the rich people, they are very rich. Definitely, they are very rich, and the poor people, I

thought like ... if I stay there I ... I ... will be like the poor people, I will have no life over there.

Hung Tran's comment certainly is a fact. As an 'emerging' country, over the last few decades, Vietnam has been making great strides in terms of economy development and the living standard of the population has much been improved generally. However, like the rest of the world, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening and in Vietnam, the situation is even worse. Author, journalist Bill Hayton in *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* gives a very intriguing explanation for that reality. In his opinion, "for the moment getting better off requires loyalty to the [Communist] Party."²³ The well connected are "exploiting their connections to become rich, and the rich are exploiting their money to buy protection from the state."²⁴ The result is widening inequality between rich and poor.

Many of my informants also mentioned the physical changes of the country in a very depressing way. One of the informants, Carolyn Hoang, told me how much the country has changed since she left right after the fall of Saigon. Coming back after fifteen years, her impression of the country was just a place where "people happen to speak Vietnamese," and "everything else has changed so much that [she] can hardly recognize."

I have a good relationship with my relatives back in Vietnam. But every year, when March and April come, I am very down. I was forced to escape out of the country, so I didn't have time to say goodbye to all of my friends, so you know, before 1996, I was so homesick that my parents just said, "Go there." So after the trip to Vietnam in 1996, I get better because when I came home I just realized that it's not home anymore. It's just a place that somewhere out there, people happen to speak Vietnamese. All the traditions were gone. And hardly anyone I know was there.

I mourn my country, I lost my country.

She talked continued to talk about the zoo where she would go to when she was little.

I bought tickets and we entered. This place used to be beautiful, and every Saigon resident could come to take a stroll under the shade of the trees or to watch exotic animals, but now it was ruined. It was dirty and litter was everywhere. Trees and flowers seemed to be tattered, as if no one was taking care of them. Most of the animals were gone, and the remaining ones depressed me because they looked sick and they were so thin. I wondered if they were ever fed. They were not only living in cages, but they were starving. I know for sure now why I had escaped from my country. I didn't want to suffer or die the way these animals had.

In Carolyn Hoang's act of coming back to Vietnam, one can easily see affirmation followed by denial/rejection. She came back to what she had thought as home only to face with a harsh reality that things have changed and that Vietnam is no longer that frozen image she had had before leaving. One thing that I realize the majority of my informants fail to recognize is that they also changed and the way they see Vietnam is colored by their new experience in the new homeland.

Mindy Truong, another member of the 1.5 generation, has yet another interesting response when I asked her if she wanted to go back to Vietnam. She said to me, "Oh yes, I always want to go back to Vietnam to visit my country, but not to live there." First of all, I find this answer intriguing because of the way this answer was worded. By saying she wanted to go to Vietnam to visit her country, she might have meant that her 'country' and the current Vietnam are two different places, yet only by returning to the current Vietnam can she visit her 'country'. At the same time, her wanting to go there just for visiting, not for living made me think of Vietnam (as

a physical entity) as a memorial of the lost South Vietnam. We visit a memorial, we do not live there. Truong's remark totally makes a lot more sense to me when she added,

I always think that I am a Vietnamese, but I love the American way, the American life. But deep down in my heart, I never refuse the Vietnamese people, like; I always know that I am Vietnamese. But I love the American way, I love living in the United States.

Inherent in this statement is a tension that members of the 1.5 generation I interviewed somehow have to deal with. To some of them, it is a blessing because they think they have the opportunity to experience being able to identify themselves with both Vietnam and America. Better yet, America gives them the opportunity to "become someone," like what Carolyn Hoang told me when she talked about her family members,

My family, we are lucky. My siblings, my parents and my cousins settle in Portland, Oregon. We are all grown up. I got a double major in Accounting and Business from UCLA, and my Master from the same institution. My next sister is working for the U.S. government as a programmer for Oregon State. The next sister, Mary, works in a bank. Long, the next brother, he is a medical doctor. He has his own clinic now and a big pharmacy in Salem, Oregon. Then, Harold Hung, he's now lieutenant in the U.S. air force. Dung, the next one is working for the U.S. government and the younger one, she has all kinds of Master degrees in Social work and she's now one of the directors of the Youth Programs in the State of Oregon.

Hoang painted a picture of success in achieving the American Dream, though she was careful enough to also attribute that to good luck. As she indicated in our conversation, all of these would not be reality had they stayed in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. However, luck was not

the only factor in her narrative. In her opinion, all of her family's success was made possible by their taking refuge in America. She confided,

Oh my God, I have heard people saying that the U.S. is the paradise on earth and I recognize that, I see that in many ways. It's the land of opportunity. There's no discrimination, I mean as long as you put your effort in what you are doing, you study hard, you get good degree you'll be good. You can do anything you want; you can be anybody here in this country. Like my sister, she's in charge of millions of dollars in a state program. Nowhere else in the world could this be. I went here and went to college with scholarship and the same with my brothers and sisters. Not Canada, not England, nowhere else.

The way Carolyn Hoang idolizes America as a land of equality and opportunity by using terms like "paradise on earth," and a land with "no discrimination" fits the grand narratives of the American Dream – getting from rags to riches; and her story of success fits that of the model minority often associated with Asian Americans.

However, to some, immigrating into the United States is not necessarily a blessing; it can be a curse because they feel they are trapped. Cindy Nguyen, who has been working as a waitress at several Vietnamese restaurants since she came to the United States during the 1980s, has a completely opposite story line when it comes to deal with the American Dream. Nguyen only agreed to let me interview her because she felt like she was indebted to another informant of mine, and she did the interview not because of me, but because of that person. Unlike a lot of my informants who think they can only be somebody when they are in America, Nguyen felt like she could be 'somebody' only there in Vietnam. Yet, the feeling of being able to be 'somebody' is

undermined by the bitter reality that she feels like she is not anyone in America but a ‘coolie’.

She said,

Perhaps I returned not only I wanted to see my parents for the last time, but also because in Vietnam, people could make me feel like I was somebody. They treated me like a foreigner who had money. Didn’t everybody want to be somebody?

As she later told me, after over ten years of working like a ‘dog’, she finally saved enough money to return to Vietnam to see her parents with her daughter whom her parents had never seen. What she did after arriving was to put on her best clothes and make-up and tried to act as if she was a successful Vietkieu, but that did not last very long. She soon realized that being ‘somebody’ is not that easy either in Vietnam when her relatives kept showing up at her parents’ doorstep. She told me,

Sometimes my distant relatives stopped by to visit me, but I tried to avoid them because I didn’t want to know their situation. I had nothing to offer them, nothing to comfort them. I hoped they understood my situation also. I wasn’t rich in America. I was a coolie just like everybody else. I wasn’t a successful business person. How many successful Vietnamese are there in America? I didn’t have any education or any skills, but I had the hope that my children would do better than me. I was a boat person, a refugee, and I was still on the boat. Sometimes I wondered where I would be anchored.

I was struck by Nguyen’s remark that she “was still on the boat,” and that it is the hope that her children “would do better” than her that keeps her going. Nguyen was apparently caught among the tensions that many of my informants are in. On the one hand, they want to come back as successful Vietkieu to show that the choice they made was a good one. On the other hand, they

have to face with a reality that life is not that easy in the new land, and hope is the only thing they can cling to in order to survive.

As a Vietnamese, doing in my fieldwork in Garden Grove and Westminster, California for several summers enables me to see both sides and to realize that what Nguyen said can be reality to a lot of people, especially those who identify themselves as boat people – people come mostly from a lower class in Vietnam. In Vietnam, Vietkieu has often been associated with wealth and success and is a refined figure that one often yearns for.²⁵ As observed by Chi-ming Wang in “Politics of Return: Homecoming Stories of the Vietnamese Diasporas,” “while the refugee mentality may still plague the Vietnamese-US community, the Vietkieu, for Vietnamese in Vietnam, is no longer a refugee but a model minority that signifies the realness of the American Dream.”²⁶ For a lot of Vietnamese in America, however, they still are refugees who have not found a place to anchor yet, and they are still staying somewhere in the margins of American society.

Overall, my informants expressed their state of “in-betweenness,” a state in which they claim to be both American and Vietnamese, a state that cannot be better articulated than what Cindy Nguyen told me in one of my interviews with her,

I think the way people here [USA] look at me is just because I am different. They have no idea where I come from. All they know is I am different. But because I am Vietnamese first before I am American. Being in America affects me in the way that it makes me kinder and more forgiving. You know, life’s too short. It makes me thank God every day, I am here. I am lucky. In 1975, I might have been one of the unlucky ones because I lost my country, but now I am a lucky one. That’s how I see it. I couldn’t thank God enough for everything. I have lived here for so long. I am a

hundred percent American, but I don't lose my tradition or my heritage. I still long to go back and I still watch Vietnamese music videos.

In short whether it is a blessing or a curse having to leave Vietnam and settle down in the United States, all of my informants, in some way, construct for themselves a “here” and a “there,” and somehow are torn in between them. The confusion most of them have to deal with when it comes to identify a home speaks to that reality. Whether they consider the U.S or Vietnam as their home, they cannot quite make up their mind.

Mot giot mau dao hon ao nuoc la – Blood is thicker than water

As discussed in chapters 1, 2 and 3, family plays an important role in every Vietnamese person and maintaining good relationships with members of both one's extended and nuclear families is a priority. Most Vietnamese people, therefore, know the proverb above since they are very little. It is a saying that reminds them of the responsibility that one should have towards their relatives.

Apart from the tensions the majority of my informants mentioned in terms of identifying their homeland, most of them are also torn between the relationships they want to maintain with their extended families and their owns, and a lot of times, they have to face with conflicts in order to make everyone happy.

In the following discussion, I will be focusing on two major arenas: the transnational family relationship, and relationship between themselves and their children.

In contemporary Vietnam, family is sometimes seen as a replacement for social services (education, healthcare, access to a basic income) that the government is no longer able to provide for its citizens. Traditional family virtues are, therefore, officially praised, and the importance of

money remittances sent by relatives abroad is fully recognized.²⁷ No wonder, then, if transnational family relationships are particularly important and significant to the Vietkieu.

Despite their geographical dispersion, family members seem to be able to keep in touch quite regularly. Contacts, in these cases are not limited to the exchange of information. They may also include financial support, which gives them an economic function. Whatever their nature, however, these contacts occur primarily within the limits of the extended family.²⁸ This is so because, for a majority of Vietnamese, family is still considered one of the most significant elements in life, even if it may now appear endangered by contacts with Western society, and if younger individuals may be ambivalent about some of its aspects.²⁹

Thao Truong, who escaped Vietnam with her family in 1980 have been sending money back to Vietnam to her grandmother and cousins since she got her first job after arriving in America. The day I had an interview with her, she actually wired three hundred dollars to one of her brothers who needed the money to get a certificate in teaching French as a foreign language. She told me, "I feel like I need to help them who are less fortunate than I am, not that I am rich or anything, it's just a sense of responsibility that I feel towards them." She later confided that she got this habit from her mother who passed away a few years back. She told me,

My Mom, when she was alive, would save all her money and send it back to her mother and siblings although we were having a hard time then. She would tell us, "Remember, we are lucky and we have to share with those who are less lucky than us." I did not agree with her then because to me it was unacceptable. I thought we needed the money and it did not make any sense to me why she would do that. But now that she's gone and that I have some extra money, I continue that

tradition that my Mom started although I had to deal with the same reaction my kids have towards what I am doing.

In fact, in 2012 Vietnam ranked seventh in the world for remittances. The amount of foreign currency sent to Vietnam by Vietnamese overseas in 2012 reached more than \$10 billion, according to Vietnam Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh on February 18th.³⁰ Although the majority of that money is from Vietnamese workers in Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan and the Middle East, the amount from refugees to the United States also contribute greatly to the growth of their own families and Vietnam as a country. People send remittances back to Vietnam for several other reasons such as to gain recognition, respect or to maintain their status. Most people, however, do so because of their (extended) family's welfare. Thao Truong actually represents a considerable number of the Vietnamese diaspora community for his/her benevolence and effort towards family preservation. He/she is curbed by the looming concern that their families would be negatively impacted if the remittances came to a halt.

This, however, does not happen without rejection from other family members, especially the children who are born in the United States. Like Thao Truong, Tuan Nguyen, another informant, has to face with the same problem from his own children. As a boat person who came to the U.S during the late 1980s, Tuan Nguyen has been sponsoring almost his entire family and helping them immigrate to the U.S. He has been putting his relatives up in his three-bed-room house in Westminster and feeding them while they look for accommodation. He still has two brothers back in Vietnam and has been sending them money to help. As a long-distance truck driver, he said he did not make a ton of money, but still enough to help. He told me,

There are always a lot of people in my house and it's always like we are having a party or something. My kids do not like that, they think I am crazy when I let my

relatives to stay or send money back to Vietnam. But you know, sometimes I ask myself: what is the point of me crossing the oceans to come here? Isn't that to help my extended family? If it [sic] was for me, I would not have left Vietnam. I did pretty well there at school and life was not that bad. My kids have no ideas and I don't blame them for that. I just wish they are more compassionate.

In fact, the concern of Tuan Nguyen's children is not completely without reasons. Coming from Hue, one of the cities in Vietnam that benefits the most from remittances from the United States, I know about families who rely a lot on their relatives in America and who basically do not do much to make a living for themselves. A friend of mine, currently living in San Jose, whose mother works as a baby sitter often complains about his uncle in Vietnam who does nothing but goes to coffee shops and waits for money from his mother. To a lot of Vietnamese Americans of the 2nd generation who spend almost their entire life in America and embrace her values, this practice of supporting members of the extended family by their parents is unreasonable and does not make a lot of sense. Members of the 1.5 generation, therefore, are caught in between what they consider as their responsibility towards their extended family and towards their children.

Another kind of tension that many of my informants expressed is their expectations of their children when it comes to the preservation of Vietnamese culture and their children's search for freedom. While many of them face this kind of tension in the role of children as discussed in chapters 2 and 3, they have to face this again as parents who want to impose the Vietnamese values on their children. "History tends to repeat itself" is what one of my informants, Mindy Tran, told me. The owner of a very big and successful nail salon in Westminster, Mindy Tran has a spacious and pretty house where she intends to let all her children and grandchildren stay.

When I came for the interview one late afternoon, her kitchen was busily occupied by herself, her daughter-in-law and three grandchildren.

Mindy: My oldest, he's a boy. He's 29 years old now. He has three children.

(pointing to the young children in the kitchen). All of them, they are my grand-daughters. He has two girls, one is two years old, the other is 14 months old, and they just have a boy a week ago.

H: Oh, congratulations.

Mindy: Yeah, so I have three. They live with me. I have a very big house and they live with me. They want to live by themselves and I tell them yes they can but just save a little bit money by staying and they can leave later.

When I asked her about her wanting to have more freedom when she was young and asked if she was a bit imposing of her to request her children to stay with her under the same roof, she said, "I was young, and I could not think better. Now that I am old enough, I understand my parents more and I would like to do the same thing for my kids. I can be over protective, but I know it's good for them." In fact, although not all my informants who have grown-up children have them stay with them, many expressed preference of that living arrangement because in their opinion, beside the financial benefits, they contend that it helps preserve Vietnamese traditions and it is good for their children.

In fact, there have been several studies on the impact of ethnic culture on the assimilation process of children of immigrants, among which Zhou and Bankston' *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (1998) gives a deeper insight into the assimilation process of the Vietnamese Americans. A concern with the community, its organization, and its impact on socioeconomic adaptation lies in the heart of their work, adding an entirely new dimension to an understanding of the process by which the Vietnamese have

sought to get ahead. In particular, in *Growing up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*, sociologists Min Zhou and Carl Bankston emphasize the importance of ethnicity in the successful adaptation of Vietnamese American youth. Their study focuses on Vietnamese American high school student in Versailles Village, an area of New Orleans occupied in 1993-95 mostly by Vietnamese refugees, immigrants and their families. The Vietnamese youth who were most likely to animate the ‘valedictorian’ stereotype were able to take advantage of the resources ethnicity provides – especially supportive relationships with their elders, most of whom were refugees or immigrants. In particular, Minh Zhou and Carl Bankston have found that younger generations of Vietnamese Americans in marginal socio-economic environments who have strong adherence to traditional family values, strong commitment to work ethic, high level of Vietnamese literacy, and a high degree of personal involvement in the ethnic community tend to disproportionately have high grades, to have definite college plans, and to score high on academic orientation. Importantly, these Vietnamese cultural ideals co-existed with views that the American way of life was modern, scientific, and progressive. In contrast, those Vietnamese who fell into the “delinquent” stereotype were usually also cut off in some way from those supportive networks; they did not speak Vietnamese well and they were disconnected from their Vietnamese culture and history. Therefore, Zhou and Bankston conclude their book claiming ethnicity is a necessary resource for Vietnamese American success.

Much as it is a favorable option, many people though that they have failed to pass on the Vietnamese traditions to their children and many blame themselves for that. Carolyn Hoang who is married to an Iranian American told me,

I teach my kids and I told them that they have to respect the elderly, and their parents.

They are not supposed to talk back to me and my husband and that they should get

together with their relatives. But the thing is, it's my fault. We went to see my parents every year but because the kids have school so they couldn't go. So now they turn around and they tell me, "Mom, you didn't teach us anything" every time I told them "You don't know anything, all you know is to ask for lucky money." My son, Michael said, "Mom, all we know is that you go to Portland and you brought back the lucky money." And that's true, it's my fault. Sometimes I feel kind of sad because my husband is not Vietnamese. It seems that Iranian tradition is likely stopped with him and Vietnamese tradition is likely stopped with me. The kids are all American. They only know that ok, my mom is from Vietnam and my dad is from Iran.

According to Hoang, it is her fault that her two children do not know much about Vietnamese culture, not to mention to preserve it. All they know is the lucky money she would bring back to them every Lunar New Year when she goes to see her parents in a different state. And she blames her marrying to a foreigner for not continuing the Vietnamese tradition in her household. The irony is, according to Hoang, she and her husband have always encouraged their children to mingle and to learn English because they know that in order for them to succeed they will need to master the language. At the same time, they also want them to know Vietnamese and Iranian. By blaming herself, her personal circumstance of marrying a foreigner and other social constraints while simultaneously emphasizing her role in her effort to pass down the Vietnamese culture to her children, Hoang situates herself in a very unique position that somehow highlights the 1.5 generation's dilemma: on the one hand, it is the need to assimilate in order to be part of the mainstream in order to succeed and on the other hand, it is the awareness of preserving one's own culture. Most of the time, they are caught in between when it comes to deal with their

children's social mobility and their own agenda of passing down their cultural root to the children.

All the while, some informants choose to accept that reality no matter how hard it is and consider that as part of being in a different place. Toan Tran, similar to Carolyn Hoang, expressed disappointment when it comes to his children's behavior. Yet, instead of blaming himself, he narrates himself as navigating the mainstream culture in which assimilation is not necessarily a bad thing. He said,

[...] they always think that they know much more than their parents or the other older people and they do not respect anybody. And it is sad, it is the social life I think, American social life. It happens to every teenager. It is sad, really sad. But after that teenage, they, I saw the American people, they settle down and they better, they are better.

What can I do? Yes, I have that feeling [meaning sad], but I can do nothing because I choose to live the life, my life right here, I try to keep as much Vietnamese culture as I can, but you have to go, when you decide to go with the other life, you ... with the other, like, American life, you have to join their culture. You cannot keep your culture, but you ... What can you do?

Hung Tran is among the informants who express a more open-minded viewpoint on how younger generation and people of his own generation should react to this ever-changing world. Instead of asking and trying his best to make his children follow the Vietnamese way, he sees their behavior as contingent upon the host culture and temporary and hopes that they will do better in the future like "the Americans". By shifting the blame from himself to the historical context, and described himself as proactive in adapting into the new culture, Tran construct

himself as a social actor who does not simply remain the same forever but changes to adapt to the new culture.

Overall, in expressing confusion when it comes to identify a homeland and highlighting a somewhat troubled relationship with members of their extended families and their own children, members of the 1.5 generation in this chapter present narratives that are permeated by tensions and paradoxes. As a result, they depict themselves as being torn between the tensions caused by their effort to be both Vietnamese and American. Despite a few discrepancies between their views on assimilation and culture preservation, altogether, my informants construct themselves as a generation that encounter severe culture clash in crafting a new self in a new land.

Conclusion

I boarded the plane to head for Vietnam on May 20th, 2013. That flight out of Seattle was full of Vietnamese Americans coming back to Vietnam. With my daughter, Cathy, being almost two and half-years old, flying was no longer a difficult time; which allowed me to engage in some very interesting conversations with other passengers, many of whom interestingly are members of the 1.5 generation. In fact, Cathy was the one who made people start their conversations with me because she was very active before and during the flight and was very friendly to people around her. People would approach us and ask about her. We would then talk about several things, from where we are heading for in Vietnam to why we are coming back there. In retrospect, I realized that I myself have changed so much since the day I first came to the United States. As I move from Vietnam to other side of the globe and come back, I am no longer that naïve little girl whose only thought was how to travel the U.S. as much as possible. I am now a married woman with a two and a half-year-old daughter whose concern is more about my little girl's well-being. I also realized I have already considered Lawrence, KS as my other home where I started my little family and spent quite some time learning and becoming a young scholar. I realized that I am no longer that person who used to think that being Vietnamese means one cannot be anything else, because I know that I am American in a lot of ways. In other words, I left Vietnam a different person and came back yet another one. All of these stuck me as both familiar and surprising. It is familiar because in many ways, I find myself in the position of my informants whose identity is shaped by their transnational experience, and yet it is surprising to realize all of the changes and similarities that I have with my informants as I try to look at myself from a distance. In many ways, I, like the people I interviewed, narrate myself differently

than I once did. I realize my identity is not only shaped by my personal transnational experience, it is also shaped by the kind of narrative I use to represent the self I would like people to perceive of me. The formation of this 'new' self leads me to reflect upon the concerns raised by feminist scholars when it comes to methodology which include the assumed proximities between the interviewer and the interviewees, the outsider/insider status of the researcher as well as the validity of the information gathered. One of the conclusions that I could draw out of this study is that since identity/self and culture are contextual, situational and constantly in flux, as researchers, perhaps we should not question the validity of the data we are able to collect. Instead, we should ask the why questions: Why do narrators choose to construct their narratives in such a way? Why the themes? Why the strategies? Only when we answer those questions can we really examine the power relations between us researchers and our narrators. An only then can we reflect upon our position in the fieldwork.

As the globalization of capital, labor, and the movement of migrants increases, the cultural identity of those in transit and those who settle in distant lands become "more fluid and decentered." From what I learn from my informants and myself, I realize that transnational identities are not necessarily fixed to a place, but perhaps to a strategy of ensuring the accumulation of needed social, economic, cultural, educational and political capital. Stuart Hall reminds us that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being.'" It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists and is ahistorical. Indeed, cultural identities come from a certain place and have histories. However, like everything else that is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

To members of the 1.5 generation, their transnational experience in many ways affects their way of constructing their identity. By juxtaposing their personal narratives and the more

broader historical context of the Vietnam War and the U.S. as a receiving country, members of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans are able to construct their life narratives in such a way that they fit the grand narrative of a refugee seeker in the United States, yet highlight the 1.5 generation experience as unique and intriguing. Specifically, by chronologically alluding to both the past and Vietnamese culture and their new life in the U.S. in all the chapters of their lives, their narratives make sense by arranging chaos into the “selves” they created. At the same time, by highlighting themes that define them as a unique generation such as disorientation, uprootedness, guilt, reconciliation and tensions, members of the 1.5 generation are able to add their own voice into the more official narrative that sometimes fail to represent them. In the process of finding their own place in the new land, amid the opportunities and challenges they have to face as a special generation, they manage to craft for themselves a new identity and that new identity is produced through the narrative they each have for themselves.

By focusing on narrative strategies of the 1.5 generation, rather than using the interviews as evidence of experience, this study has significant contributions to fields of study that I have laid out in the introduction. In particular, the project shows that in transnational studies and studies of migrants, narratives are not just stories people tell about their lives, they are also lenses through which researchers can make sense of the transformation of national and personal identities. When it comes to migration, identities, like culture, are not completely sealed packages that get transferred from here to there; they are constantly in flux when people migrate to a new place. In other words, there are ongoing relations between self and context. Although the context does not mark a shift between a stable identity and a constructed identity, ongoing constructions of identity is always in relationship to context. The idea of identity as being constantly in flux while always in relationship to context also shows that culture and self are not

necessarily bounded with one place, rather, they get transformed, remade and reflect how people experience the world. In the case of Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation, their experience of traumas, up-rootedness, disruptions, disorientation, guilt and reconciliation is incorporated into the self they represented, creating their own version of Vietnamese and American identity. The experience of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans in this study speaks to the experience of people of many other ethnicities in diaspora. In their effort to craft a new self in a new land, they simultaneously create their version of national identity that embodies their experience. What this means is national identity is not necessarily the same/similar among people living in diaspora, rather, it shows a certain group of people's idea of what a national identity should be based on what they have gone through. In the case of Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation, it is a nostalgic version of Vietnamese national identity, one that encapsulates the ideals of a long-gone nation – South Vietnam. All of these are made through the narratives they recounted.

As a contribution to Asian American studies and Vietnamese American studies in particular, this research provides another way of using narratives and a different approach of looking at identity. Narratives, whether they are in the form of autobiographies or oral histories, are usually seen as evidence/representation/reflection of experience/identity. In this project, however, narratives are viewed as processes through which people create their new self in diaspora because of its focus on the strategies the interviewees use in narrating their selves. As a result, this study provides different lenses through which identity of Asian Americans in general and Vietnamese Americans in particular can be examined.

In conclusion, narratives, to members of the 1.5 generation serve as sites where they can make sense of their disrupted and chaotic life, and where they highlight their struggles to survive

in a new homeland with a haunting past. Narrative is a process of identity formation. To members of the 1.5 generation, it is an especially important site for making sense of disrupted and chaotic lives, in order to survive in a new homeland with a haunting past.

¹ Interview with Van Nguyen – Summer 2011.

² Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-national America," *Atlantic Monthly*, no. 118 (1916).

³ K. Scott Wong, "Diasporas, Displacements, and the Construction of Transnational Identities," in *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*, ed. Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Roger Daniels, *Not Like Us: Immigrants and Minorities in America, 1890-1924* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997).p.17.

⁷ The literature on the exclusion of Asians in general and Chinese in particular is too extensive to cite here. Some recent and important works are Chan (1991), Lowe (1996), Lee (2003), McClain(1994), Salyer (1995), and Wong and Chan (1998). For the impact of the Immigration Act of 1965 on Asian immigration, see Hing (1993) and Reimers (1992).

⁸ Wong, "Diasporas, Displacements, and the Construction of Transnational Identities." p.43.

⁹ See for example, Weglyn 1976.

¹⁰ For a thorough discussion on this topic, please see Lowe 1943; Okada 1957; Kingston 1976; Chin et al. 1975; Hagerdorn 1993; Maira and Srikanth 1996; Chuh and Shimakawa 2001.

¹¹ See Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc Szanton 1992; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994, Maira and Srikanth 1992 for more information.

¹² See Bammer 1994; Harvey 1989; Rouse 1996; Hu DeHart 1999.

¹³ See, for example, Chen 1940; Jensen 1988; Lee 1996; Hsu 2000; Fujita-Rony 2003.

¹⁴ See Chen 2000; McKeown 2001.

¹⁵ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham N.C: Duke University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Kieu-Linh Carolyn, *Transnationalizing Vietnam: Community, Culture, and Politics in Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Doreen M. Indra, "Bureaucratic constraints, middlemen and community organization: Aspects of the political incorporation of Southeast Asia in Canada. ," in *Uprooting, loss and adaptation*, ed. K.B. Chan and D.M. Indra (Ottawa: Canadian Public Health 1987).

¹⁹ Louis-Jacques Dorais, "From Refugees to Transmigrants: The Vietnamese in Canada," in *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*, ed. Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005).p.171

²⁰ Linda Trinh Vo, "Vietnamese American Trajectories: Dimensions of Diaspora," *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 1 (2003).

²¹ Our interviews were very short and fragmented in many ways because of the interruptions by his customers. I could not set up any interviews with him outside of his salon because he was constantly working and supervising his assistants.

²³Bill Hayton, *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵ This viewpoint of looking at Vietkieu as a refined version is often seen as the imperialism of America.

²⁶Chi-ming Wang, "Politics of Return: Homecoming Stories of the Vietnamese Diaspora," *positions* 21, no. 1 (2013).

²⁷ See Tuong Lai 1991; Papin 1999

²⁸ They may sometimes include unrelated friends, however.

²⁹ For this ambivalence, see Kibria (1993), Guilbert (1993), Thomas (1997), and Chan and Dorais (1998).

³⁰<http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/business/66682/vietnam-ranks-seventh-in-the-world-for-remittances.html>

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